

WORK TRENDS RU

John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development

Transcript Episode 9: Beth Simone Noveck

Podcast Introduction (*music playing*): Welcome to *Work Trends RU*, presented by the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. In this podcast, we speak with experts, policymakers, and thought leaders about issues affecting work, education, training, the economy, and well-being. Each episode of *Work Trends RU* provides insights into important topics like changes in the job market, economic challenges, and how artificial intelligence is shaping the future of work. Our guests share their thoughts and reflections on how public and private sectors can better address the needs of workers, job seekers, and employers. Join us as we discuss the evolving landscape of work and education on *Work Trends RU*. (*music ends*)

Carl Van Horn: Welcome to *Work Trends RU* at Rutgers University's Heldrich Center for Workforce Development. I'm Carl Van Horn. I'm the director of the Heldrich Center and today we're fortunate to host Beth Noveck, who is the state's Chief AI Strategist. Prior to that, she served for several years as the head of the Office of Innovation.

Beth, welcome to *Work Trends RU*.

Beth Simone Noveck: Thanks, Carl. I'm thrilled to be here.

Carl Van Horn: For the last eight plus years, you've served the state of New Jersey in these two roles. And for those who might not be familiar with these two important initiatives, let's begin with the Office of Innovation and tell us what you think are some of the key accomplishments you and your colleagues have made during that period that you led it.

Beth Simone Noveck: So, the Office of Innovation was started at the start of the Murphy administration to really help bring tech to the table to achieve the governor's and this administration's core priorities. So, I like to think about it as one bullet point of every five. That is to say, it's not about tech for its own sake, but how we think about using technology, data, and innovation to help achieve other core priorities.

So, what that means is things like helping to feed a hundred thousand kids and provide food benefits for them by using tech and data to comb through our databases and find kids who are eligible for food benefits whom we were missing. It's about doing things like helping 65,000 new companies get started in New Jersey using business.nj.gov; again, using technology to help create one-stop shopping where an entrepreneur can go and figure out everything they need to know about: How do I start a business in New Jersey? What forms do I need to file? What financing opportunities are available? Instead of having to hunt, going to many different

agencies, filling out different forms, trying to figure out what the requirements are, bringing all of that into one place to make it faster and easier for people to fulfill their dream of starting a business. Work that we worked on together with the Heldrich Center around simplifying and improving how we deliver unemployment insurance to our residents. So, instead of forms that then take almost an hour to fill out, we can bring that down to just a couple of minutes using new tools to make it faster and easier for people to get the benefits for which they, through their tax dollars, have paid. It should be easy to interact with government, not difficult. And really that was the idea of the Office of Innovation was, working with our agency partners, whether it's around business or around unemployment or around food assistance or a range of other issues, working with the subject matter experts in agencies to use tech and data and now, increasingly, AI to help deliver services, to deliver benefits, and to make it simpler for people to interact. So, it's really been about a multi-year effort of, I think, simplifying and streamlining how government works to improve residents' lives.

Carl Van Horn: And just drilling down a little bit, what were the key elements that enabled you to do this? Personnel, cooperation, leadership, money... What was the secret sauce that made this an important and successful enterprise?

Beth Simone Noveck: I think you've already mentioned all of them. So, one, it starts with leadership, right? If we didn't have a governor who didn't make innovation and talking about how we use tech, not as something for the few, but as a way to serve the many, a priority of his administration, you know, on Day One, not only naming a Chief Technology Officer, but then adding a Chief Innovation Officer and creating the state's first Office of Innovation, talking about the ways that innovation can help grow the economy in the State of New Jersey and modernize and improve how government works, whether it's the work of our team or whether it's the work of economic development to help promote both tech businesses and the tech economy. But also again, the use of technology in government. So, leadership is extraordinarily important because that sets the signal for everybody else to say, we need to figure out how we use these new tools to really improve how we do things.

The second thing is personnel and talent, as you mentioned already. So, that creating that Office of Innovation, which is now when you include both the core team members, its consultants, and then I'm most excited about the students who work with us, including students from across community colleges in New Jersey, that is a team that is now a formidable force of technologists, designers, data scientists, policy professionals, and above all, people who are really just passionate about asking that question, "How can we use tech to make government work better for residents?". Because there's a lot of work to be done. So, training and up-skilling in partnership with every agency and also with the Civil Service Commission, ensuring that we're teaching the skills of how to responsibly and ethically use technology, data, and innovation to our agency partners, to people who work in agencies, whether it's the Labor department or the Education department or the Health department, it's really making sure that more employees are aware of and possess the skills to be able to do this kind of work for themselves. Even a hundred people in the Office of Innovation, there's too much work to be done and too small a team to make that happen.

So, it's really about trying to disseminate more of this learning. And that's also where I think as we start to talk more about AI, AI is making that both faster to do and, I think, more imperative.

Carl Van Horn: What were they key obstacles? You've mentioned the elements of progress, but what do you think were the key obstacles of others thinking to imitate and build their own strategy within their own state or their own city government?

Beth Simone Noveck: There are not enough hours in the day and too many things to do. We have so much work to do to undo decades long, accreted kind of bureaucratic ways of working. You know, government has been built around an alphabet soup of agency names and acronyms. Ways of thinking about the way government works. We divide, you know, government, have agencies like a labor department and an education department and a health department. But if what you're trying to do, for example, is figure out what your health benefits are or figure out what your training opportunities are or figure out how to start a business or how to get a license or pay your taxes. Many of the things we do as residents, you know, we don't think about it in terms of some agency name. We don't even know what the agency is that we're supposed to go to. Yeah, maybe I know the DMV is the place I get a license in most places, but beyond that, what if I want to get a license so that I can start a business? Or, what if I want to think about, you know, what are my opportunities as a worker to get training? Where do I go? Where do those resources live? It's too many forms, too much alphabet soup to navigate. So, we have a lot of process to undo or to redo or to reimagine. And what a lot of governments have struggled with is how do we do things like we've done in New Jersey when we created business.nj.gov? So, that idea of saying, let's not organize it by agency name, some statute, or some law, what we do is say, "What is everything a business needs to know whether you're starting a business or you have an existing business that you want to grow? What is everything that I need to know?" and let's put it in one place for people. And I think that's kind of the idea and there's a lot of work to do to figure out how do we do that around other, what I might call, life events. I'm trying to get married. I'm getting a divorce. I'm having a baby. I'm leaving a job. I'm starting a job. We need to really rethink government from the perspective of the citizen and what they need instead of from the perspective of some accreted bureaucratic procedure or legislation. All that stuff can exist in the background, but we need to make it much simpler for residents. But that's a lot of work to undo.

Second, people in government, we are trained for very good reason in compliance. How do we ensure that we protect the rules, that we protect the law, that we're safeguarding citizen rights according to the law and the rules? But that tends to get us into this very bureaucratic mindset of is this what the rules allow or don't allow instead of asking this question, "How do we make it easier for people and what can we do?". So, that's, there's a lot of work to undo the culture, to undo how people are trained, to bring new people into government with new skills around things like data science and marketing and design that we need to help us reorient how government works.

So, I think the biggest failing, if you want to put it that way, is just not enough hours in the day to do all the things that we've had the ambition to do. Again, that's beginning to change and where AI is helping us to do things so much faster than we've been able to do before. And that's one of the things I'm really excited about. There's also, I think, a lot of things that we need to do to educate ourselves, lawmakers, and the public in recognizing the role that technology plays in helping us to build capacity in government and deliver better services. So, a lot of the conversations we have around tech are around the dangers, what not to do, putting the guardrails in place. We absolutely need to do that. And there are a lot of risks, but we also need to be asking the question proactively, what are we doing with technology to make

residents lives better? What can we do to safeguard people's rights at work, but also to make the lives of workers easier? So, I hope we can talk a little bit more about specifically as it relates to work.

Carl Van Horn: Well, before we get to that, there'll be a number of gubernatorial elections next year. And, if you were sitting in a room right now with those candidates after they've been elected, what would you tell them? Is it possible to replicate? Do you have the playbook or is it not that simple?

Beth Simone Noveck: The Office of Innovation published a playbook and I'm literally just coming from a call where we shared that playbook with representatives of other states, sharing some of the lessons learned. And that's something we've tried to take the time to do, is to share those learnings, to engage in that knowledge exchange, learning also from others, but also sharing what we're learning about how to do these things better. So, for example, one of things that the Office of Innovation, especially around our AI efforts, have done is to upgrade our call centers across New Jersey to help us handle 10 million calls faster and better. So, whether you're calling about unemployment or you're calling about your ANCHOR tax benefit or you're calling about starting a business across a range of call centers and services, we've tried to give better tools to the people answering the phone. We've tried to use the data, in other words, learning from what people are calling about to put better information on the web so that you don't have to call at all. And, when you do call, you're getting your question answered faster and more accurately, dramatically decreasing the time that people are spending waiting on the phone, dramatically decreasing the time people are spending on the phone.

That kind of playbook is something we can and are sharing with others. So, I would encourage anybody in this space, whether they're at the state, local, or federal level, number one, to focus on that knowledge sharing opportunity, because there's a lot that's been learned in New Jersey and other states about how to do things better that others can learn from. Number two, to invest in workers in the workforce. The only way we're going to get better at doing these things is we invest in the skills of the people doing the work to learn how to do these things better and differently. So, that investment in workers is, I think, really paramount and whether that's public sector or private sector, that investment in worker skilling is extraordinarily important if we're to realize these productivity benefits that can come from technology. And three is to recognize that technology is not a substitute for work or for workers. All of the data and research shows that, in fact, it's workers working with AI that's more productive, not AI or technology substituting for workers. And this is not just an AI story, it's about how we work with all technologies, that really make our workforce more productive and enable these kinds of benefits. So, I think this is extraordinarily important and to recognize that the story of technology isn't just a story about business and what we do in the private sector, it's also a story about how we make the public sector work better for individuals, for residents, and for businesses, which in turn helps to promote the economy and the creation of jobs.

Carl Van Horn: That last set of points you made, I think it's very important because mostly, especially government workers, view technology as a threat to their opportunities to continue to do what they like to do or should do. You said that you've converted a lot of people to believe that this actually is not a negative, but actually an adjunct way to enhance their work.

Beth Simone Noveck: Well, it can be. Let's be very clear that we should not blame technology. We should not blame AI. We should not blame an inanimate tool for the bad decisions of leaders whose goal it is to transfer wealth from workers to shareholders. So, when Amazon lays off large numbers of workers and, as has been leaked, you know, is seeking to automate much of its workforce, that is not the result of AI or automation. We can't just blame AI. What we have to do is to blame the corporate leaders who are making those decisions, who are not investing in their workers, who are not ensuring that there is a transition plan. If you are going to lay off workers, that there's a transition plan for those workers to new jobs in the economy. And what a lot of companies are recognizing, and this is again driven by empirical evidence, is where they have laid off workers instead of retraining them or investing them, they have not seen the productivity gains. In fact, there was very interesting research that came out from MIT that showed that 95 % of the AI projects that companies have embarked upon have not worked. It's when you're training workers to use technology, as we've done in New Jersey, that's where the benefits come from. So, when you call a call center in New Jersey, you're not getting a chat bot. What you're getting is a human using technology to give you a better answer to your question. That's the thing that works. And that's what also responsible companies are finding is its investment in workers plus the latest technology, that's what results in the productivity gains, not replacing workers.

Carl Van Horn: What I was alluding to is, at least my impression, is that you've been able to bring along the state workers, and convince a large number of them in New Jersey, that it is an enhancement of their work, not a threat.

Beth Simone Noveck: Well, that's because we're talking to our workers. We're having conversation. We didn't roll out an AI policy or the use of AI or new technologies. And, again, this engagement with the workforce, both private sector and public sector, long predates AI. It's something we did when we ran our Future of Work task force a number of years ago. It's something we did when we came in and launched an innovation plan. We started having conversations with our citizens, with our students, with our workers about what they see the opportunity being, what they're excited about, and what their concerns are. And we started to address those concerns. Again, hearing that people are worried, are you gonna fire me? Are you gonna replace me with a chat bot? We've needed to make very clear from the top down that that's not the purpose of introducing technology. We've needed to make very clear that we are rolling out free training for people and encouraging them to take it. And that's something from the governor on down where he has said, "I want everybody to learn how to use these tools, not to replace our workers, but to make your jobs more enjoyable, to make your jobs more productive, to help you do the thing you set out to do when you join the public sector, which is to serve residents.". People who work for government don't do it for the money. They do it because they want to serve and they're excited to have tools that can help them do that.

So, they're excited when, for example, the state's Chief Forester turns around and uses AI to go out and ask residents how we can improve Batstow State Park. It doesn't replace the Forester; it doesn't replace people working in parks. What it does is help people do our jobs better and in a way that I think is more meaningful and exciting for people. And that's a lot of what we're seeing around the use of technology is unlocking new innovators in government to do projects we never could have done before.

Carl Van Horn: So, we've already started talking about AI. You have this other title, Chief AI Strategist. It sounds to me like they bleed into each other. What's the difference? What is the Chief AI Strategist do?

Beth Simone Noveck: They bleed into each other because I'm still very much part of the Office of Innovation, which is led now by Dave Cole, the state's new Chief Innovation Officer, a fabulous team, who are doing this work with our agency partners on applying the use of technology to deliver better services. But with AI becoming so important in the economy, the idea was really to create a dedicated role that could focus both externally on how we're growing AI businesses in the state, what we're doing to make it easier for those businesses to come in, or for existing businesses to become AI businesses and adopt use of AI and to hire people. Second is this issue of training and upskilling has become really paramount. So, we've gone from training a few workers to now training 15,000 workers in the public sector in New Jersey in particular, making free training resources available also to private sector. We launched an AI training program for our New Jersey municipalities to ensure that our towns and our cities also have opportunity to get that training and that more people are learning what AI is, how to use it, and I think above all, when not to use it.

So, what some people call responsible AI use, in other words, not get too bedazzled by the bright shiny object of new tools, but instead to ask the sober and practical question, what can I do with these tools in my job to do my job better and in a way especially that serves the public interest and that serves residents? So, there's just so much to do around AI. We're also the first state to launch an AI policy. We're now not the only one, but we were the first state. We're on our second version of our AI policy. So, there's a lot to do to ask and answer the question, are the right ways to use AI and not to use AI, to encourage experimentation, you know, and at the same time to ensure that we're safeguarding residents. We also were one of the first states to come out and articulate clear guidance that our existing laws on anti-discrimination and on bias also apply in the world of AI. So, in the same way that you cannot discriminate in the workplace, in the housing market, against people, AI doesn't change any of that. So, the attorney general's office under Matt Platkin and his team put out clear guidance, again, the first state to do so saying, saying we're not gonna tolerate discrimination using AI tools just as we didn't do so before. And at the same time beginning to unlock innovations in using AI to help us to do new things like help process civil rights complaints better and faster so that people, again, are realizing not only government benefits, but also ensuring that the state is protecting their civil rights, again, helping our lawyers to use AI to be able to do that work faster and better.

So, just a lot to do, whether it's around AI or other forms of technology, both externally in the economy and what I'll call internally, if you will, in helping the state to function better. So, we divide and conquer a little bit, but there's a great team in the Office of Innovation that is actually helping to build AI tools, ensuring that on every place that we are providing a service, we're also asking you how can we do this better and that we can actually hear what you're saying by using AI to help us summarize and sort through all those comments to ensure that government is more responsive and better at listening to residents.

Carl Van Horn: We haven't talked about this yet. To what extent have you engaged with the K-12 system helping educators cope with this new technology?

Beth Simone Noveck: So, the Department of Education in New Jersey has been very forward thinking and forward leaning and putting out guidance very early to educators. And what I'm most excited about is giving out money, creating a grant program to fund innovations across school districts so that we can begin to unleash and unlock the people on the ground doing the real work. The teachers who are saying, "Oh, I have an idea for how to use ChatGPT to teach reading better or to teach math better." Also, something through our training programs, we have been sharing national learnings across the country and exactly that. So, not just in New Jersey, but how innovators in other places are starting to use new tools in responsible ways to improve educational outcomes for kids. I think we're early on this journey. I think that's gonna accelerate in the coming months. But it's definitely been something that from Day One, we were thinking about what are we doing for our children? What are we doing for kids? And how are we ensuring that the AI that we're using in schools and giving to people is really about serving the needs of kids, not serving the needs of AI companies. But it's something we're going to have to do carefully as we roll out technology in school. You know, there's a national conversation now about rolling back social media, rolling back the use of phones and having less tech in schools. So, I think above all, we need a conversation with families, with educators, with caregivers around what's the appropriate use of technology, at what point with our kids that's in their best interest.

Carl Van Horn: Closing comments? What would you say to person listening to this, or what your advice would be to another state or to a person as they're encountering AI? How should a citizen in the state think about it?

Beth Simone Noveck: So, let me say first of all that the best way to think about it is to try it for yourself. It's really important to understand what these tools are and they aren't. There's an awful lot of hype and headlines about the robot apocalypse and how AI will kill all jobs and destroy us all. I think that is overblown hyperbole. Obviously, we have to be careful. Obviously, there's a lot of uses of these technologies, for example, in the theater of war. To operate drones and to do things for that do involve killing people. But the kinds of tools that most people are aware of and are using, Claude, ChatGPT, Gemini, the kind of commercial generative AI tools, again, there's much more to AI than that, but the stuff that most people have heard about, this is really just a fancier word processor, and it's nothing more than that, which means trying it for yourself, understanding what it can do, what it can't do, how it benefits you. I will point people to the free training programs we have set up. This is a national free resource that we created out of New Jersey, building off, again, training we were doing that we've now given away to the world at innovate-us.org. You'll find a lot of courses there and workshops and free things that people can learn and will be my next project is really on rolling out what I call our civic AI training, free tools for ordinary folk, for community members about how to use AI to interact with government, to organize your neighbors, to do projects in your own community. That's my next project. So not focused on public sector, but on everyone. So, you should try these things for yourself and see what works and what doesn't work. But the last thing I'll end on is that reminder that AI is just a tool. It is a calculator, it's a word processor. So, what matters is how we use AI, how employers use AI. So, don't let anybody blame the tools for bad decisions in your workplace. If employers are talking about firing workers, it's the fault of the employer, not the fault of the AI. If people are talking about using AI or other tools for surveillance in the workplace or for worker monitoring, that's a decision in the C-suite. That is not the necessity of the technology. There are wonderful things we can do with these tools to

help kids to read, to help kids learn how to do math, to help government workers translate things into multiple languages, to make government speak simpler and easier for people to understand so that it's clearer for residents to do things like answer the phone better.

So, how we use AI is up to us and we need to ultimately be responsible for those decisions. So, I would encourage us to try these things for ourselves so we can demand, whether it's in our workplace, our government or in our communities, that we're using AI for good and not for ill.

Carl Van Horn: That's a great message to end on. Thank you so much, Beth, for your work in New Jersey. As a resident of New Jersey, I certainly benefit from it. The citizens of the state have as well.

I do want to go to a different segment. I like to talk to people about their experience in entering the workforce. I'd like to ask you, what was your first job for pay when you were a young person and what did you learn from that?

Beth Simone Noveck: Does that count running a tomato stand in the front yard of our house in Toms River? My parents got a W-2 off of my selling tomatoes in the front yard. I got life experience, but I don't think so. You might not mean that, although it was my first entrepreneurial experience.

But I think whether, whether it's selling tomatoes in the front yard in Toms River, or whether it was working as a research assistant doing footnotes for a professor, or whether it was joining the public sector workforce working both for the federal government originally and then for state government, I think what all of these experiences are the thing that I would just encourage people in their thinking about entering the workforce is the opportunity to do well by doing good. That is to say, to think about opportunities to serve, opportunities to do public service, whether it's formally for government or working for a civic organization or even working in a private business, to say, "How can I do something that is really mission driven and designed to serve the public?".

So, really to ask and answer that question in whatever is your chosen career or field, number one, what can you do to do something that serves others? 'Cause that in turn, I think makes for the most meaningful and enjoyable kind of work for yourself. So, whether it's in your formal job or volunteering, I just think that public service dimension allows one to live a life of purpose in some way that's really great, number one. And number two is to recognize that the people managing you don't always know how to manage. So, learning the skill of managing up, learning how to get clarity on what is it that I need to do, by when, and for what purpose is as important a skill as learning how to manage down and manage others and figure out how to do your own work is to manage in both directions and learn how you can get clear on what we're trying to accomplish so that you can do things faster and better.

Carl Van Horn: That's good advice, absolutely. Well, thank you very much, Beth. Appreciate your spending some time with us best of luck as you continue on this journey.

Beth Simone Noveck: Thank you very much.

Podcast Close (*music playing*): Thank you for joining us on today's episode of *Work Trends RU*, where we explore the issues affecting the future of work, education, and how the workforce can be better supported by both the public and private sectors. Tune in next time as we continue our conversations on the evolving landscape of work and education. (*music ends*)