

GW Hi! Welcome to the Global Opportunity Initiative Podcast Series. I'm. George Westerman, Your host, George Westerman: our guest today, is Von Tom Queen Livin, who is Ceo of Futuro health. She is a nationally recognized executive and thought leader on workforce development. In her career she's developed the first perspective, having led a workforce program for corporations, public community colleges, and now for a future which is an innovative joint effort between Kaiser Permanente and its unions to train thousands of workers for good jobs in the Allied Health professions. George Westerman: Bonus, also author of the book Workforce Rx, and she hosts a podcast series with the same name Von Thanks for being here.

VAN TON-QUINLIVAN: I think these wicked problems lend to a conversation where, how do we bring best practices to bear so that we don't start from scratch? Because we need to go faster and further than before. I came from the private sector, then the public sector, and now the nonprofit sector. From the private sector, I did, like many of you, was solving the workforce issue for the company of 20,000. Brought that from having no opinion to becoming a nationally recognized best practice.

But part of that was determining, how far can I push the design of the workforce solution that I had put in place to better understand, does it hold if we went from this occupation to this occupation, from this geography to this geography, from sub-baccalaureate-trained occupations to bachelor or masters-trained occupations? So part of the opportunity that everybody now is to test the edges of the best practices that they're putting in place as they do programs.

And then I was appointed by the governor to drive the workforce mission of the largest system of higher education. And that's the community college system of California, which has 116 institutions.

And so we were able to bring that from having roughly about \$100 million in discretionary funds. But through applying a set of best practices, we were then able to grow it to \$200 million to \$700 million to over a billion dollars because we were able to re-prioritize workforce from an afterthought to a policy priority.

That can only be done if you're beginning to weave a lot of best practices together. And now I'm at Futuro Health, and we're a nonprofit. That is bringing all of these and combining these best practices in a novel way in order to tackle the health care workforce shortage, especially the allied health roles. 65% of the health care workforce are these allied health roles, and we need them. Everybody needs them, a proportional share of workers in our backyard.

GW: You know, Von: I love. How you call these wicked problems. MIT has an ethos that the hard problems are really the ones worth solving. They're harder to tackle, but they're going to have the biggest impact for our school and for our society. George Westerman: What have you learned about how to solve these wicked problems in workforce learning while This is so important, that idea of working closely with community organizations. The people running these organizations are smart, and they're passionate, and they really know what's happening on the ground they can tailor the broader offerings of a government or educators to solve specific challenges with specific types of people. But that's just one point. You said you had some others.

VAN: So I'd like to just share a few thoughts.

The first is if you're tackling these workforce issues, know that it is a team sport, not an individual sport. So I'll say it again. It's a team sport, not an individual sport.

VAN: And at the crux of workforce development are three sets of players coming together in order to create that economic mobility that we all desire. Inclusive economic mobility that we all desire. And each of these parties need to do what they do best and not try to do everything. And that's a misconception by many employers, for example, that they have to do everything. So the employers, what should they do best? They should focus on articulating what they need and then hiring. On the education side, what do they do best? They should close the gap between the population and then what the employers need. We talked a lot about credential, skills, all of that good stuff. And then the third party are the community-based organizational workforce boards who can go out in the community much more deeply, screen for candidates that meet the criteria of the employers, and case manage them. And I want to just share how the three combine together by conveying what I call my fish story.

So when I was with the energy company of 20,000, we did all this, right? We had put together a program that involved all of these three players. There was a young gentleman, 19-year-old man named Aleki who was in this workforce development program, seated at a college.

And our supervisor was super excited that he was moving through and was expecting that he would come out on the other side once he went through the pre-employment testing. We were hoping that he would be on the list, because he seemed like he would be such a good fit for the company.

Well, it turns out that Aleki went fishing when he was 15, and Aleki caught a fish that was too small. And as a result, he got a ticket. And as a 15-year-old, he did not pay the ticket, and then the ticket went to court. Well, as a 15-year-old, he did not show up in court, so Aleki had a felony on his record.

He did not know he had a felony. And so as an employer, what would have happened to Aleki? He would have applied for as many jobs as he wanted, but he would have just gotten the thank you, but no thank you card. We have other candidates that we're considering. It's not really the role of employers to work through all of those issues.

VAN: Is it education's work? Well, education could have given him the certificate, the associate's degree, the bachelor's degree, the master's degree. Didn't matter. He was blocked from employment because of that record.

And it actually took the third leg, which is a community-based organization. They were the ones as case managers to work with him to expunge his record so that the employer, us, could have hired him. And so it was a good story at the end, but really, that's why the three-legged stool works best when all three parties are involved, because none of us can do all of that on our own. So it is a team sport, not an individual sport.

The second point I want to make is a down economy is a great opportunity, because that's the moment when you can bring collaboration together in novel ways. When I was in private sector trying to solve a skills issue, I thought, wow, why can't we get more investments into these programs?

When I moved over to the public sector, I realized, my goodness. There's a ton of resources moving through at the federal level, at the state level, philanthropy, even corporate resources. They just often function as a silo. Instead of braiding and building upon each other's effort, they all started from scratch. And so part of the advantage of a down economy is that as we're resource-constrained, we need to figure out, who are all the assets? Who are all the players in the landscape? And build upon the collective work rather than think that we are the only one. So doing that environmental scan, stakeholder scan, asset scan, and connecting the dots will allow each of us to move much further than on our own.

GW: Well, it's nice to hear this. Some silver lining to that recession cloud that's potentially lurking out there on the horizon. I hope we can find good ways among our GoI community to identify creative approaches that can solve some of these challenges. Any other big lessons you want to share.

VAN: The third aha that I had was that some experiments are best done outside of government as proof of concept, and then can be amplified by government. So for example, digital badging, which all of us know really well, there was a point in time it was supported by Mozilla as an experiment. And when I was in the-- joined the California community college, nobody knew what digital badging was. And so what we wanted to do was solve the soft skills problem, because employers were complaining about it. But also, insert an experiment, which was, let's begin to play with digital badging and whether these soft skills can be badged in this way.

VAN: So it was the first introduction of digital badging into the system, and we did it through a grant that said, OK, whoever wins this needs to have 10 colleges coming together, agreeing on the curriculum that the employers want. But as you do this curricular work, we want you to incorporate digital badging. And so that experiment went from 10 colleges to 20 colleges to 60 colleges to 85 colleges and rode this adoption curve. And it was seeded in a very intentional way. So government can amplify in such a great way, but it's not great in terms of the initial experimentations.

GW: You've been in a number of sectors, and every sector, of course, feels like the grass is greener in the other sectors. So now you're in health care, and many people say health care is a very fertile ground for this kind of work. What do you think? What is it about health care that makes us either a better place or a more challenging place to do the kind of work you're doing in workforce development?

VAN TON-QUINLIVAN: Your question makes me laugh, because when I was in the energy sector, they said, oh, we're so unsexy. Why don't we say that we're in the water sector? [LAUGHS] And the water sector said, well, we're so unsexy, let's call ourselves some-- market ourselves some different way. Health care is interesting, because there's so much credentials, and it's a great place to figure out instructional design and how do you create stackable credentials that facilitate economic mobility. So for example, we have an aftermath of the COVID pandemic, which is the mental health, behavioral health pandemic. So behavioral health means alcohol, depression, drug use, for example.

The shortage is at the master's level, and that's a very, very far distance for people to go for an education. So how do you begin to build-- bring in communities into high-volume roles in less than a year, right? So a certificate or a credential into that first job.

And then you begin to play Chutes and Ladders, move them into associate degrees like a drug counselor or to the bachelor of social work or to a bachelor plus masters in order to get them into those therapy roles. So health care is a great place where there's a lot of structure around the credentials.

And what's also fantastic about this moment in time, as painful as it is, is that the pandemic unlocked a lot of good options, quality options in the virtual environment in education, right? Whether it's hybrid or fully virtual, as long as it has live student support. And so now you're able to combine in novel ways, and not just limited to what is in your backyard.

So I call this sort of the unbundling and re-bundling of education. A person can start with soft skills in one institution, go to the technical skills in another institution, and at a later point, go for their next stack, the credential at a third institution. So that is all being facilitated by the pandemic that did not exist previously.

GW: You know, I really like this analogy you mentioned of shoots and ladders and degree to non degree upskilling and on ramps and off ramps. You reminded me of what we heard from places like Beth Israel Deaconess in Boston or Upmc, in Pittsburgh, where they're taking people from lower paid, less skilled positions in the company like reception or even food services, and they're training them to feel hard to fill roles in labs and other places. They're not waiting for government or schools to fill that pipeline. They're taking. People they know, are good workers, and they're giving them skills for better jobs. But this type of program it needs someone who is willing to take the risk and make it happen whether they're inside companies or across organizations. And those people often run into roadblocks can be really frustrating. What advice would you have for somebody who's just trying to start this, but feels like they're banging their head against the wall? What do you think? How do you get this work done?

VAN TON-QUINLIVAN: I think, George, you're asking, like, what unlocks our individual superpowers, right? Because it's only when it's unlocked then you can go the distance, because yes, there's a lot of resistance, a lot of drama as you try to make change.

I have to share that back in 1975, my family escaped from the Vietnam War. My father back in Vietnam was a neurosurgeon, and he couldn't do that here in the United States. And my mother was a teacher, which was a very venerable occupation, and she couldn't do that here in the United States.

And so you would think my parents would be very bitter. But instead, they were always grateful. And they said, Van, we're never going to give you stuff, because stuff can be taken away, alluding to the war.

Instead, we're going to give you your education, because nobody can take that away.

And so I do the work that I do because I want to pay forward that same opportunity that I had. And so that is what unlocks my superpower. When I am touching that work to give somebody their opportunity and break through with education, then I'm able to go the distance. When I'm not touching that space, my superpowers don't appear. So it's really quite fascinating.

GW: You know, if I'm. One of your super powers is, you know, von one of your superpowers is what the electrical engineer and me would want to call impedance matching. But I think you probably call it this

matching supply and demand in the skills market. Can you share some examples of how you've done that.

VAN TON-QUINLIVAN: George, I call this the issue of the fire hose and the garden hose.

I discovered this when I was in the private sector. And I couldn't find a solution or articulate the solution until I actually went over to higher education.

So think about how higher education works. There's an economics, right? They have to fill a classroom of 25. If you have less than 15, for example, you have to cancel the course. So there's an economics of education.

So I call that the fire hose. And those 25 students go through their education program. They all come out at the same time and the same month.

Well, what happens on the job side? The job side is more of a garden hose. They drip out one job, drip out two drops, drip out three drops of the same kind. Well, that's very uninteresting to education, right? And no company drips out 25 of the same job at the same time.

So there's a mismatch between what employers need and how education needs to operate. So a solution I found to that was really pooling jobs. What does that mean?

That means as employer, I have a supply chain. Those companies that are in my supply chain may have a similar occupation, have a similar role. Can I batch them all up so that I can fill up a class? Can I work with a trade association to aggregate?

Can I even work with competitors? We will collaborate at the beginning in order to create a talent pool, and we'll compete at the point of hiring. So collaborate at the beginning, compete at the end. So these are ways in which you can aggregate and pull up jobs.

And what happens when you start pulling the jobs? Well, all of the sudden, you become so much more interesting to play with for education.

So now at Futuro Health, because we're aggregating the volume of jobs, we have educators coming to us and saying, well, you know what? We don't really have to start in January and June and in September. We'll decouple from the academic calendar. We'll start in February too and March and April and May. All of the sudden, it becomes much more responsive to the need of adults, because adults don't like to sit around. The moment of their interest, they don't want to wait until the fall to get started. So you begin to get a set of solutions that is very different when you start rethinking this fundamental dilemma of the garden hose and the fire hose.

GW: I'm fascinated that as labor and management conflicts are growing, and even companies like Starbucks and Apple are seeing unionization drives, your nonprofit exists for union and management to work closely together on upskilling challenges. What are you learning about the different perspectives? Given the fact that you're working with these people on a regular basis in both sides of this new nonprofit.

VAN TON-QUINLIVAN: Well, as I said, workforce development is a team sport and not an individual sport. And I think there's an opportunity for unusual collaborators. What happened here was there's a gap of 500,000 allied health care workers needed just alone in the state of California. And as I mentioned, every state has the same dilemma, because 65% of the health care workforce are these allied health roles.

And so what our union founder was willing to do was trade off some other things. And the two as part of the collective bargaining agreement agreed to set aside a pot of money in order to create a nonprofit that grew the next generation of health care workers. So again, very unusual allies coming together, really because this is a team sport, not an individual sport.

GW: Wow! That's really interesting. Let me close with just one more question. A lot of women look to you as a successful woman, executive as a kind of a superhero to follow. What leadership tips do you have for women leaders and founders who would consider you as a reference point.

VAN TON-QUINLIVAN: Oh, that's very generous, George. I am the beneficiary of a lot of other women who have passed down their knowledge.

I will tell you, I was trained at Stanford. At graduate school, I did dual masters of the Business School side and the education policy. We spent a lot of time learning how to do our profession. All of us, right? Navigating how professions intersect with the personal life, there's no playbook for that other than understanding the stories of those who went ahead, and what are the issues they face in navigating the personal-professional intersection? And I think that's been the most valuable thing that happened to me when I was selected for a mid-career program called the International Women's Forum Fellows Program. And in that program, I was in my 30s. There were other women in their 40s. And they shared and passed along what were the helpful tips for their success, but the peaks and the valleys. And I think the more that we can speak and learn from those ahead of us-- just like I'm sharing in workforce development. There are some best practices developed. We don't have to start from scratch. I did not start from scratch, because these women passed on their learnings to me.

GW: But I want to thank you again for taking time with us. I learned so much from you every time I talk to you now, everybody, if you'd like to hear more from von and the many people she knows in the workforce space, you can find her podcast by asking your favorite search engine to find workforce, Rx podcast. And, as always, if you have any questions or comments, you just want to talk about this work or any other work. You can write to us at [Goi Dash Info at Mit dot Edu](mailto:GoiDashInfo@MIT.edu). Thanks, and have a good day.