

June: Jake Hirsch-Allen (LinkedIn)

GW: Welcome to our Beyond the Resume Podcast series. I'm your host, George Westerman. Today, I'm delighted to be able to talk with Jake Hirsch-Allen, who is the Workforce Development and Skills Lead for LinkedIn Talent Solutions. Jake, thanks for being with us today.

JH: My pleasure, thanks for having me.

GW: So let's start off. Jake, you have this huge oversight of many things that are happening in this space, and you look at this link between workforce development, higher ed, and the broader LinkedIn ecosystem. What are some of the key challenges in Workforce that people are trying to address today?

JH: There's many, to be Frank. Our labor market remains a bit fragmented, it remains with many skills gaps, sort of like cheese in the sense that Swiss cheese, in the sense that there are enough holes that workforce development remains at the top of every governor in America's top three priorities list.

JH: Workforce development is a priority for every state in America and probably every country in the world. And in part, that is because of the skills gaps that riddle our economy and society. And some of the specific reasons for those skills gaps include everything from the distance between much of higher education and training.

In workforce development, we still have two systems that, for a very long time, we have been trying to either merge or integrate better, but a very damning report came out of Harvard in the past couple of months, out of Harvard Center for Workforce, on the training options that, for instance, are paid for by federal workforce development dollars because the impact of that training has been so abysmal on the participants career outcomes or employment outcomes.

So I think that's a classic example of how the link between higher ed and workforce development is broken. Similarly, the links between workforce and economic development remain quite fragile or brittle and, in many cases, broken.

So as an example, if our workforce development was aligned better, the number of folks who were being placed into the most in-demand jobs, whether that's trucking or the skilled trades, health care, or now, of course, AI skills, would be far smaller. And in fact, you'd have both the employment training and the higher education focused exactly on those areas.

In contrast right now, there is very little education that is primarily driven by labor market information. Rather, it's driven by some combination of student unions, faculty unions, and the political priorities of those leading either those organizations or entire regions, states, countries, et cetera.

So I think part, like maybe in short, maybe in summary, we as humans are getting in the way of systems that could be doing a lot better, and I think that LinkedIn is one of the opportunities we have to, pun intended, link these systems more closely because whether it's employment or education, folks are both including it, of course, on their profiles on LinkedIn, but also connecting with each other, connecting to schools and employers on our platform.

And so we have the opportunity, again, to increase the efficiency of those connections using everything from our online learning software to our labor market information, from our job-matching capabilities to the professional network itself.

GW: I wonder, when I compare what's happening here in the US to what I see over in Germany, what I see over in UK with their apprenticeships, they seem to be much better coordinated than we are here. Is this a free market challenge or is this a lack of incentives challenge?

JH: I do think that the free market has something to do with it. In particular, I just don't think in America there's a long history of having three key stakeholders work together. Labor, slash, unions in the one case, employers or business in the other, and the public sector, government, even sometimes including nonprofits and higher ed in the third.

And the reason, I think, as you put it, is to some extent the emphasis that the US has put on the free market, which has, of course, decreased the role of unions significantly and ensured that they're-- not even ensured, but maybe even encouraged a degree of tension between labor and business, business and government.

Whereas in Europe, they're really seen as three collaborative stakeholders. So in every conversation about a new program at a postsecondary, you'll have the relevant union and employers at the table, and you'll have integrated-learning apprenticeships far, far more prevalent because they require the collaboration of all three of those stakeholders.

And once you get it right, I think that system is much easier to replicate. In essence, you get something like a flywheel where more and more collaboration happens between employers, unions, and the public sector or education.

There are some fantastic examples in the US often following, to your point, the German tradition. So as an example, Futuro Health 0 health created by a woman named Van Ton-Quinlivan connects SEIU, one of the largest health care unions in America and the largest, I believe, in California to Kaiser Permanente and the California Community College System in a manner that basically cuts out a bunch of the areas that are particularly rife with discrimination.

So for instance, no longer do you need a certificate or a degree to access a number of jobs at Kaiser Permanente, but rather, there is a pathway with some basic training through the union so that every person who achieves a minimum skill set then is guaranteed an interview.

And this is dramatically increasing the number of minorities, of women, of marginalized populations more generally who are getting jobs at Kaiser Permanente through this pathway in

a manner that, I think, is a model for the rest of America and which follows closely the European and German and Swiss traditions.

GW: I'm glad you mentioned Van and Futuro Health. She was our first guest on this podcast series.

JH: Wow. Full circle.

GW: You've been involved in a lot of projects that despite the challenges here, that they're making things work. What's one of your favorite projects you can talk about?

JH: Thank you for giving me the opportunity because I am, honestly, quite excited about how our technology is affecting change in two of the industries that I think are most resistant to change workforce development and higher education.

And in particular, in workforce development, which I've really been focusing on for the past few years, collaborating with organizations like the National Association of State Workforce Agencies, which now works with us to offer LinkedIn Talent Solutions directly to its members, the state departments of labor or workforce development.

And these collaborations have allowed us to help workforce development organizations, workforce boards, American job centers leverage the latest and greatest in job-matching technology, the same technology that recruiters at every one of the top countries-- companies, excuse me, in the world, the Fortune 500, those recruiters have for over a decade been using LinkedIn Recruiter and LinkedIn.com in order to find their candidates.

And right now, particularly since the pandemic, there aren't enough people knocking on the doors of workforce boards. And so what those boards are now able to do is look on LinkedIn for the folks who have already put their hand up saying, I'm looking for work, narrow their search to a particular geography or a particular skill set or industry, and then communicate with the individuals who are explicitly saying, I'm looking for work on LinkedIn.

Offer them all of the wraparound services that an American job center has on offer, whether that's bus passes or food stamps, TANF and SNAP support, family supports, et cetera, and offer some guidance from a career standpoint, which, I think, is essential for folks who often are coming at this from a relatively-- from a perspective of very limited exposure to a variety of careers.

So the classic line in workforce development is somebody walks into a workforce board and they only imagine themselves as being a social worker or a cop, as being a bus driver or a teacher because those are the only people they've interacted with to date.

I, of course, had the opposite experience. I had the privilege of interacting with a huge swath of private sector, public sector, professional, tradespeople, et cetera, and therefore, had role models, had a means of envisaging myself in their roles that the average American from a more marginalized zip code likely did not have.

And so what we're doing is we're basically superpowering the human services in workforce development with LinkedIn's ability to match people to jobs more effectively.

So once you're actually on the platform, it'll allow individuals not just to display, of course, their resume, their job history, their training, but rather, to use that information and in a very skills-based manner, then match it to jobs, which we, of course, recommend to the individual, and which folks in career services and workforce boards are using to, again, help guide individuals.

That's one key aspect, but when we describe LinkedIn Talent Solutions, it includes four categories of software. And so the one I just described is the most used tool in recruiting, it's called LinkedIn Recruiter. Others include job postings, which really boost the exposure of particular jobs on LinkedIn to individuals.

So for instance, when a state wants to prioritize jobs in a particular industry or when a local county is really helping a particular company, let's say Tesla in Arizona, hire more people, well, we will then-- they will pay for job postings to boost those jobs and dramatically increase the number of candidates applying for them.

The other two aspects perhaps lesser known, certainly in the staffing and recruiting space, of LinkedIn Talent Solutions include LinkedIn Learning, which is, of course, our online learning platform. About seven, eight years ago, we purchased a company called Lynda.com and transformed it into what is now the most used online learning platform, I believe, in corporations.

And the great thing there is that these individuals are getting to train on the same platform that they will potentially use at their employers, and they have access to 18,000 courses in seven languages on basically every human skill required in the workforce and many of the technical skills required there.

So that's the online learning component. Finally, the last bit is our labor market information, our data on skills and jobs. And what is unique about LinkedIn's data is while the actual jobs, the job postings in America have been relatively democratized, basically every government, every major company in this space has the same database of jobs, which is updated regularly as a result of something called the National Labor Exchange and collaborations between state governments, employers, et cetera, what LinkedIn has that's unique is the supply side.

We have the individuals' profiles which are-- because the first thing somebody does when they change the job is update their profile, often, the most up-to-date record of the labor market. And so the great thing is that we are leveraging that supply-side data to supplement what governments currently have in terms of labor market information.

And while we don't have a complete map of the economy, because in the states, there are some states where we're getting up to 90% of the working population have a LinkedIn account, the result is a really useful comparison to state or public labor market information. So those are basically all of the resources.

Now I know you asked for an example of how we're working with states. Perhaps the best example at scale these days is Texas where we just rolled out statewide.

And to be frank, as much as I spent the past five minutes describing a variety of LinkedIn's-- or actually, all of LinkedIn's Talent Solutions, I think the one I missed was Company Pages, which we can get into later, I think the most important aspect of our work has actually been the digital transformation, the increase in capacity for American job centers, for workforce boards to use technology.

And to be frank, you could swap LinkedIn out and put another technology there. But most importantly, these are boards that were really working primarily offline, where technology was almost exclusively used for reporting purposes until recently, and where now we are, again, building the capacity of the average career services or business services or administrator within a workforce board to use the latest and greatest in job-matching and online learning and labor market information technology.

GW: So that's as LinkedIn, you got so much stuff. You can come and you can say, I've got a full solution for you, how do you do things. But when you and I first met, it wasn't about that. It was about LinkedIn being one of the set of partners in developing a more ecosystem-based view of this thing.

JH: Completely.

GW: So if you're not LinkedIn and you go to these workforce boards and say, I've got a great solution, let's work with me, you need something more, right? You need the ability to pull these partnerships together. So can you share one of these partnerships that you were able to help create?

JH: Yeah, absolutely. There's been a bunch and they're really spanning a variety of different sectors. I'm going to go way back to when I was focusing on higher education up here in Canada. And the frustration was that at that point, Lynda.com, now LinkedIn Learning, was being used by most post-secondaries in Canada either for their faculty development in some cases to actually teach students-- so in coursework and for staff career development as well.

But the smaller institutions were paying 10 times more in some cases for the same licenses than the large universities because we sell software as a service at scale, as almost every other software as a service company does. And so what that means is the more you buy, the less it costs.

And it means that small organizations-- let's say a community college versus a university are disadvantaged. They have to pay more for the exact same thing.

And what's interesting is up here in Canada, much like, I think, in much of the rest of the developed world, even the developing world, but unlike in the US, our community colleges, particularly our polytechnics, are the most efficient organizations at getting folks into jobs at-- their employment outcomes are, in many cases, even higher than our universities. And in fact, a

lot of folks in Canada will go from a university to a college in order to get the skills necessary to join the workforce.

And so what I spent almost a year doing was working with every postsecondary here in the province of Ontario to have them influence the province itself, the provincial government, our equivalent of the state government, to pay for access for those 45 universities and for the ballpark million faculty, staff, and student across each of those institutions to pay for access to LinkedIn Learning for all of them.

And we think that the resulting learning-- in some cases, this is learning to learn, learning how to learn online in particular, 300-and-some-thousand people in the first six months watched a video as part of this initiative, and we think that's amongst the most learning per dollar that's ever happened. It was the largest agreement that LinkedIn had ever signed by license numbers-- again, about a million licenses. And it became a model for how we could work with postsecondary systems right around the world.

So Columbia's entire vocational education system, it's called CENA was using LinkedIn Learning, and we saw greater rates of employment and of entrepreneurship for women because they were able to access learning, the content that they wouldn't have otherwise been able to access from home.

Scotland's Employment Service rolled us out nationwide. And so we've, again, seen this model replicated in many, many places and not just in higher education, but also, to my earlier points, in workforce development and increasingly even economic development.

GW: So fantastic, thank So let's think a little bit more on the policy side, then. So one of the things-- two of the major challenges we see here in workforce are, number one, career navigation; and number two, the assessment and certification process. What are you seeing as some interesting developments in those areas?

JH: Great question. So I think in the career development process, we now have the ability to use real-time-- LMI real time labor market information to inform people's decisions about what training they're going to go into and what careers they're going to go into.

So in the past, generally speaking, people just followed in their parents' footsteps, or in a big family, you'd have one person who went to the church, one person who went to the school, one person went to the hospital. There was sort of a relatively obvious and short list of options for employment.

But in recent years with the diversity of jobs themselves increasing dramatically, we now need more accurate information in order to recommend to individuals what jobs they should be going into. So as an example, the skills gaps we were talking about before in the trades or in health care, those are areas that far more people when they are in secondary level and postsecondary schools, should be advised, should to be recommended to go into because they pay well and society needs more folks in them.

And yet, I think we continue, particularly in America, to see this divide where there are far too many folks in retail, in other aspects of the essential work economy who are massively underpaid while we don't have enough folks in these in-demand, slightly more skilled or higher-skilled roles.

But again, I think the real time data can really help the folks in Career Services with giving better recommendations. The assessment side, I find, is fascinating because assessment really is the crux, in my opinion, of education. It is amongst, if not the single most important step in the process of educating an individual, both at the beginning and at the end.

And the reason I say that is at the beginning, we should be offering individuals credits for their prior assessed learning. So when you walk into an educational institution or even an employer, we should be running a sufficiently granular assessment of both their technical skills and, to the extent possible, their human skills. And to be clear, I think most human skills need a human to be involved-- to be in the loop, so to speak, of the testing process.

But we now have the ability to give folks credit for what they are coming into a training or job with in a manner that rapidly dramatically accelerates the education process because you can, in some cases, lop off half or even more of the training portion because the person already has those skills.

And then-- and some states are doing this already at scale in a way that's amazing. I think, if I remember correctly, Ivy Tech is offering individuals paid-for credit where they already have skills or even where they partially completed a community college certificate or degree.

And so I think that's at the outset. At the end, of course, when you finish the training, the assessment, is usually what dictates what credential you're going to get. And credentials remain the way that most employers choose, or at least on paper, choose their prospective employees.

Practically, 80% of folks actually get a job based on who they know. So when you combine those two, you have some massive-- or two massive reasons for why inequality is so hard to fight, in the sense that people are being actively discriminated against based on either degrees, which, in many cases, are not necessary for jobs, or based on the fact that they don't have the same social capital, which, to be frank, I think platforms like LinkedIn may be aggravating.

And that's, in my opinion, why skills-based hiring is so important, why getting to a place where people are put in jobs based on their potential, based on their skills, not based on their degrees or their skin color or their names or their network, I think that will result not just in a much more efficient economy, but also, of course, a much more inclusive one.

GW: I was just looking up-- credential entrants identified 1.1-- nearly 1.1 million credentials.

JH: Mm-hmm.

GW: And you talked about just the proliferation of this gets difficult. Have you seen any good ways that companies or employers or schools are able to weed down that 1.1 million into the 2

or 3 that really matter for the types of jobs they're talking about? Is this just a process or is there something more systematic?

JH: I think there's absolutely something more systematic, and the ideal would be that each of those credentials is tagged with skills. There's a group called the Open Skills Network, for instance, that is working on a variety of technologies like risk skills, descriptors, which can be baked into the Credential Standard, so that we know what skills are associated with which credential and then employers can hire based on those skills.

But in reality, I think there is a huge range between those credentials, which are, in essence, licenses to work in a given profession. So whether you're a nurse or an engineer or whether you're a cosmetician or a lawyer, there are required certifications that are the credentials for each of those professions.

On the other hand, a huge percentage of that 1.1 million are much more vague. They are the thousands of LinkedIn Learning and Coursera, Udemy, and edX open online courses which do often result in a certificate or a credential, but which employers really don't understand, to your point, the value of sufficiently to make hiring decisions based on them.

And again, even within that range of less, let's say, formal credentials, there is a range because, for instance, the Google courses or the Unity courses, these rapidly proliferating tech company-originated trainings, they are really pathed right into working either for one of these-- the Google courses for working for Google, or for working for an implementer more likely of Google technologies or Microsoft technologies, et cetera.

And so those are closer to the bar exam-type situation where the certificate leads straight into a job. And then again, there's the other huge range of random postsecondary, massive, open online courses which do not necessarily lead directly to a job in which employers are very confused by.

GW: You mentioned that 80% of people get jobs based on who they know, and of course, if you're from a disadvantaged environment, you're not only disadvantaged in your learning and your economic situation, but also disadvantaged in the reach of your social networks. So that calls out the idea of the experiential learning, the apprenticeships, these kind of things. What have you learned about how to make those things work well?

JH: Ah, great question. I've actually focused a lot on the online internships that range from a short-term project, like a company up here in Canada called Riipen, R-I-I-P-E-N, automatically matches students with employers to do these small projects that are a form of work-based learning.

And that range goes all the way up, of course, to a full apprenticeship, a multi-year-long accredited-by-the-government education where you are often earning and learning-- so you are being paid to learn and being paid to learn on the job and often having coursework mixed in with that on-the-job experience.

There's no question that is the most effective way to learn for the vast majority of fields. And so the short answer to your question is we just need more of that. Now, how is technology supporting it?

Well, you could imagine, for instance, during the pandemic, it became very difficult to get a lot of that work-based learning, and with the increased-- dramatically increased interest in remote work, particularly on the employee side, since the pandemic, there are more and more jobs where you can actually do the apprenticeship, you can do the internship online only.

And I think there are some key pedagogical leading practices in how you structure those online-only apprenticeships or work-integrated learning. I'll really quickly list a bunch of the companies that use these technologies. So what's interesting is many of them come from the jurisdictions that are further advanced in work-based learning and are coming into America as the amount of interest and funding for apprenticeships and work-based learning more generally increases dramatically.

There's even a new association created by a venture capitalist named Ryan Craig who has invested in a bunch of work-based learning organizations as a means of closing skills gaps in America, and this association is specifically of apprenticeship intermediaries, to create more apprenticeships.

Because his belief is that, in part, the reason in the US there aren't enough is there is not enough connective tissue, as I was suggesting earlier, between employers, and educational institutions-- between educational institutions and the economy.

So some of those pedagogical best practices include, you want the individual who's going through the training to picture themselves having completed it. That's it's highly motivating to be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. And so often, for instance, in a training video or a set of training videos, we'll start with a recording of a past student.

They're first working on their first day at a new job based on having completed the training, and that hopefully that individual will resemble, in some ways, the candidates or the trainees going through the program so that they can, again, self-identify with them.

We're also going to want to ensure that the quality of the video content is really high. So we've got the largest film studios in North Hollywood where we record our LinkedIn Learning content, in a small town called Carpinteria.

And we continue to invest massively in content production because having Hollywood-quality content, showing a clip of Richard Branson on entrepreneurship or Oprah on communication really goes a long way to having learners captivated and interested in continuing this online learning, which, of course, the motivation for, in my opinion, one of the most important parts, much more important and much more difficult than with in-person learning.

And then from that point, once you've both shown them themselves and shown them the quality of the content, then often you'll get into the much more-- not pedantic, but at least perhaps

boring, and yet necessary content. So if you're teaching the person Excel because they're going to go into an analyst job in finance or something, the next videos will be literally on the Excel.

And the key from that point on is to ensure that the training is as interactive and real world as possible. The more the student is actually, again, interacting with other students with the faculty member or with an employer, the more they're going to learn, and the greater the extent that that interaction is based on what they would actually be doing on the job. The more real-world it is, again, the more effective the training is going to be. So that's a few tips, but happy to keep going if it's helpful.

GW: There we go. That was really helpful. It's interesting, we did some work here just surveying some community colleges and employers, and we found out that when you rank the validity of certification or mechanisms to show what you know, certifications were above degrees, above associate's degrees for middle-skilled jobs.

And the challenge was, work experience you've done during your classes was near the bottom of the list because it was unclear what you were doing. Was it a toy experience or real experience? And because they couldn't really judge, that it just wasn't useful. So that idea of making this work experience real and leading to something, I think, is a really important point.

JH: 100%.

GW: So Jake, just one more question for you. We could go on all day, I know, but you've got your finger on the pulse of a lot of discussions that are happening for many sides of this labor market and the training market. What's the biggest emergence-- what's the biggest emerging challenge that we should all be thinking about right now?

JH: Hmm.

GW: The answer is generative AI.

JH: Yes. I mean, I honestly do think the answer is AI. I'm not sure if it's generative AI. I would actually argue the most pressing challenge is the potential, the very unknown, and particularly from a timeline perspective, potential of artificial general intelligence, AGI, not generative AI.

But I think right now, everybody is, of course, and understandably obsessed with generative AI, not just because it's offering these incredible new capacities and has the potential to lead down this path towards AGI and the potential destruction of our planet, but also, perhaps more interestingly in my opinion, because it presents a possibility of us changing our relationship with technology.

It is both offering a mirror of our own humanity. It is taking the entire wealth of knowledge on the internet and then reflecting it back to us in a conversational manner that is perhaps easier than ever before for us to understand. And what we're seeing in that reflection, I think a lot of people are unhappy with. It is a world that is more fragmented, it is more polarized, it is an image even of our own knowledge that is less accurate.

The hallucinations that everybody accuses AI of, and rightfully so, are actually based on often incorrect human information. The internet is full of not fake news, but rather, just incorrect facts or mistakes that humans have made. And then, of course, these engines are collecting all of these mistakes and feeding them back to us again in a manner that I don't think presents a particularly positive image.

And so maybe we can take advantage of this moment, a moment of realization that I found that the pandemic for me personally also provoked in order to try to imagine a better future. In order to instead of constantly naming our largest tech companies after the metaverse from Neil Stephenson's Snow Crash, which was very explicitly dystopian, instead, perhaps, we can think of a more utopian image or a future and then try to build the technology and regulate the technology in order to get us there.

And so in some ways, I'm actually hopeful that the massive attention being put on generative AI-- and of course, it's going to have massive implications specifically for education where just the interactivity and the access to knowledge, the greater access to knowledge should democratize some aspects of education, but others are suggesting could also increase inequality because those with access to the kinds of computing power necessary for generative AI will, of course, have a massive advantage over those who don't have it.

And so I think, again, there is huge potential here, and that is probably the greatest challenge for both education workforce development, probably any industry in the next little while. But there's the opportunity to remake these industries, to repaint our image of ourselves in a more positive light, again, working back from a more utopian potential future.

GW: Well Jake, I want to thank you for sharing your insights here on our program. We certainly could talk forever about this, but we have a limited amount of time. I also want to thank you, our listeners, for being with us for another episode of this Beyond the Resume Podcast Series. If you have any questions or any comments, you can always contact us at goi-info@mit.edu. Thanks and have a good day.