

Jason Altmire ([00:04](#)):

Welcome back to Career Education Report. I'm Jason Altmire, and we are going to focus today on the workforce shortage. And we have talked about it many times. There are few issues more important to America than the shortages that exist across many professions. There are a lot of groups and individuals that are involved in trying to solve that problem, but perhaps the most powerful voice in doing so is the US Chamber of Commerce. The US Chamber of Commerce has on their website the following statement, "America's facing a workforce shortage. There are too many open jobs without people to fill them. As a result, too many businesses can't grow, compete and thrive, and too many workers can't realize their American dreams," and we could not agree more.

([00:54](#)):

And today, as our guests from the US Chamber of Commerce, we have Cheryl Oldham. She's the Vice President of Education Policy at the US Chamber, and she's also a Senior Vice President of the Education and Workforce Program at the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation. And equally interesting, she worked in the Bush administration, President George W. Bush, for eight years, including tenure as the acting assistant secretary for Post-Secondary Education, and Chief of Staff to the Undersecretary of Education where she was involved in policy and strategy that oversaw the coordination of programs and policies across vocational education, adult education, post-secondary education, student financial aid, all the issues that we care very much about on this podcast.

([01:46](#)):

So Cheryl, thank you so much for being with us.

Cheryl Oldham ([01:49](#)):

I'm so thrilled to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

Jason Altmire ([01:52](#)):

Yeah, given your background, I can't think of anyone more qualified and credible to talk about the issue of the workforce shortage. And the US Chamber has undertaken a monumental effort, put a ton of resources, taking it very seriously, and it's called the America Works Initiative, which you lead. And I just was wondering, to start, could you talk about what is the America Works Initiative? What was the genesis of it and what are you trying to accomplish?

Cheryl Oldham ([02:21](#)):

Yeah, thanks, Jason, for leading with that. It's a big priority for us. And I would say the genesis of it was literally not being able to have one conversation with a CEO or a senior executive in any company in any day who didn't say workforce was one of, if not the top issue that they're struggling with. And America Works was created to try to bring together the whole of the Chamber and the Chamber Foundation and the work that we do on both ends, whether it's the policy and advocacy that we do on the chamber side or the programmatic work that I lead on the foundation side where we're trying to address this really persistent challenge of twofold, not having people with the set of skills that the business community is looking for in needs or also just not having enough people, the labor market shortages and the shrinking American workforce.

([03:25](#)):

And so it's twofold. And so we wanted to really show the commitment to the issues and bring both houses together under one initiative that's really focused on, how do we get the right policies in place?

How do we help the business community to manage their workforce challenges? How do we get both public and private sectors together to address? And they're challenging issues. They're not easy. There's no one thing or one silver bullet as we like to try to find in Washington DC, which is like, what's that one little policy thing we can check the box on and go about our day? It's complicated.

Jason Altmire ([04:05](#)):

What I find interesting and exciting about the work that you're doing at the America Works Initiative is you're doing more than just talking about it. It is a complicated problem. There are huge burdens and hindrances to progress on this issue. There's a lot of things getting in the way, but I like the fact that you're actually taking action, you're doing things, and we're going to talk about some of those things. But in order to start, I was hoping maybe you could just lay out what does it look like nationally, some of the... And your website at the America Works Initiative has incredible data and charts and graphs and information on unemployment and labor force participation, anything that people would want to know related to this, but can you talk about what is the problem related to not just certain professions, but across the country, and what are the consequences currently to America of these unfilled jobs?

Cheryl Oldham ([05:02](#)):

Absolutely, and thanks for referencing the resources at uschamber.com. And you can Google America Works at US Chamber and it'll come right up. There's a robust data center there where we try to bring the best data that we can find, publicly available data that we can find to really tell the picture of the workforce challenges that we're facing in this country, whether it's by industry or specific areas, whether it's women in the workforce, what has held women back from re-entering post-COVID and other issues. So there's lots there.

([05:40](#)):

But from a national perspective, I would say you'll see a lot of talk about what the national picture is. And I would caution folks to really think about or just to focus on what it looks like at the local level because we talk about this from a national level, and it's important to look at the numbers. We've got 3 million more jobs available than we have people in the labor market available to take those jobs. So that's a huge gap, and that is one that we're trying to address. And that's really hard. We need more bodies. We need to be thinking about everybody who is capable and wants to work and to get them back into the labor market searching, whether that is, again, this issue of women, whether it's people with special needs and disabilities, whether it's their demographic issues, whether it's justice involved individuals. We need to be thinking about older Americans. We need to be thinking about everybody, immigration, in order to get more people in the labor force.

([06:45](#)):

But what's really important is the actual issues of, or industry needs, skill needs, those are going to change, depending on industry and depending on where you are. The needs in Phoenix are different from the needs in Louisville, Kentucky in terms of industry and job openings. And we see this every day in the work that we've been doing for about eight or 10 years now on the Chamber Foundation side, which is to really help employers manage their talent like they do every other supply chain. And that has really helped to bring into focus the unique needs within states, within communities around these issues.

([07:32](#)):

So there is this broader national issue, and there are some common industries that we hear a lot about, cybersecurity is one. Pretty safe to say, every company, no matter your size, you need some

cybersecurity talent. And so those are sort of persistent challenges across the country. But in Kentucky, they have an equine industry that is really important to that state and they need a workforce in order to keep it thriving. And that is not something that they're worried about in Colorado maybe.

Jason Altmire ([08:05](#)):

And I know that the Chamber was heavily involved, and has been for years or decades even, in federal funding for infrastructure improvement. And we have seen great progress made on that front. And I'm sure you travel a lot as I do. You cannot go to any city in the country without seeing construction cranes everywhere. Every airport in the country is being renovated or rebuilt. And just every type of construction is being carried out across this country, but you're going to need the workforce to do that. And when you think about the 80,000 worker shortage in just truck driving, for example, there's 80,000 fewer truck drivers than there are slots available. The medical professions, especially allied health and nursing, partly related to COVID and people leaving the workforce, partly related to retirements and the aging workforce, but partly related to the incredible need in an aging population and people not getting into the pipeline to fill those jobs.

[\(09:08\)](#):

I talk all the time when I talk about the importance of it, to put it in perspective, if you're sitting on an airplane and you look at those folks who are outside working on your plane, the aviation technicians, you want two things. You want there to be a lot of them, and you want them to be really good at what they do, and that's what career schools do is help train those folks. But it crosses the spectrum across all professions. And I'm really interested to hear, what actions is the America Works initiative taking to solve these problems? Because as I alluded to earlier, it's one thing to talk about them, but you're doing more than that. You're actually putting boots on the ground and making an effort to solve these problems. How are you going about that?

Cheryl Oldham ([09:52](#)):

I'll step back and talk a little bit about where we started, which was, as I said about eight years ago, and which just tells us how long these issues have been a problem. And obviously COVID exacerbated a lot of challenges, but they've existed pre the pandemic. And we represent the business community. We represent employers of all sizes and sectors, millions across the country. And when we first were looking at what is our unique value proposition here and how are we going to help really address the skills gap, the labor shortages, it became clear to us that the way we have always done things in this country obviously has not yielded the results that we want.

[\(10:37\)](#):

And so, what is the role of the employer community here? And I think what we have traditionally done is we have allowed them to play a bit part in fixing these challenges, which is to say, let's get an employer on my advisory board, or maybe there's one or two on a workforce development board, Or we ask one or two people what they think about the curriculum that we're developing. But we, by and large, leave this to the supply side to fix. We leave it to the colleges, the universities, the workforce training programs, the career programs, and we say, meet our needs as the employer community, and then we get maybe not great results and frankly not unfairly, I think, placed that burden on the supply side if we have not properly engaged and led in this work.

[\(11:29\)](#):

So that is our theory of change is that the employer community needs to play a much more robust leadership role in creating pipelines of talent into open and available jobs. And so that's where we

started. And so we went and studied the principles of supply chain management, and then we applied them to talent and we created what is called the Talent Pipeline Management Initiative. And that is a set of strategies that helps the business community, using their own data, oftentimes working with competitors, to come together and say, okay, what are our most critical positions that have gone unfilled I cannot compete and grow? And we're going to share data. We're going to do the hard work internally of figuring out, okay, what are the skills that I need? What are the competencies? What are the credentials that I value? And I'm going to do all that work as the business community before I even go to my preferred providers of talent. And then I'm going to work with them to build what it is that we need.

[\(12:37\)](#):

And the bottom line is, and it's not even just, oh, we want to make sure the employer community has all the skilled workers that they need, everybody wins in a scenario like this because the business community is able to clearly articulate to whoever the provider of talent is, what exactly they need. That provider of talent can build it. And then the student, the job seeker is the ultimate winner here because they get the education that they need. They're able to get the job and a career after.

[\(13:12\)](#):

So we built Talent Pipeline Management. We started with seven pilots across the country in 2014. We built an academy. There's a curriculum that's on version 5.0. We now deliver it online through an online platform. There's a credential associated with becoming a talent supply chain manager. And we're in 44 states and Canada, employers who've been trained on this, who are implementing it in various stages. And we have seen just incredible results. I mean, I mentioned Kentucky earlier in their equine industry.

[\(13:54\)](#):

Kentucky's a place that's so interesting. Head of the former head of the Kentucky Chamber when we were first building this said, I'm doing this in Kentucky because I'll tell you what we don't do is we don't... This was many years ago, so things I think have changed, but we don't go to the workforce development system in the state of Kentucky to meet our workforce needs. They're not doing what we need them to do. So they created a workforce center out of the Kentucky Chamber. They now have an entire staff of Talent Pipeline managers. They have state investment out of both Republican governors and Democrat governors. They have industry collaboratives and all the major industries in Kentucky. And they are building pipelines of talent. And again, the real winners are the students, the job seekers. So we see it working, and I think it's just flipping the script on how we've always done this work. So that's just one example of some of the work that we're doing on the ground.

Jason Altmire [\(14:54\)](#):

I mentioned earlier that you were leader on these issues at the Department of Education, US Department of Education. So you bring some expertise to my next question, which is you've mentioned a few times providers of talent helping to train people and fix the skills gap. What is the role for education, and in particular career schools, in helping to solve this problem?

Cheryl Oldham [\(15:20\)](#):

No more important, partner in this, but I think this ties into my last, what I was just saying is I think we have unfairly said... They should somehow know what the education is that are needed for the jobs, what is the training. We hear this all the time, which is we just need more business education partnerships. Yes, we absolutely do, but those partnerships need to be, in our view, where the business community plays a much more robust role in that partnership. And it's not, as I said, just coming to the

table as one person. It's not bringing every stakeholder around the table and we all sit and ring our hands and then we go away and nothing happens.

[\(16:05\)](#):

We owe it to the education community. We owe it to your members to tell you very specifically what it is we need. And then, if you're willing to raise your hand and say, "I'll give it to you," I'll work with you to develop the curriculum. I'll work with you to develop the training. I will give you exactly what you need. And then we have built an actual partnership that works. I think a lot of the partnership language is very light. And a lot of people want to be "demand-driven," but if you don't have employers really leading that, I think it's kind of a name only. And do not get me wrong, getting employers to lead in the space is not easy because they've got day jobs and they're trying to make payroll and they're doing a million other things. So I'm not suggesting at all this is easy work. It's not. But again, there is no easy answer, I think, to these problems.

Jason Altmire [\(17:04\)](#):

And that is the key. And that's something that our schools do very well. Often it happens at the local level, but it can also be at the national level where you will see, for example, auto technicians and schools that train them working with the big auto industry and local auto dealerships all the way up to national car companies. Certainly, the aviation industry partners with the National Airlines, and they do create that pipeline for talent that I think is essential to helping solve this problem.

Cheryl Oldham [\(17:35\)](#):

Why do we bias the path? You know what I mean? We do at the federal level, clearly, right? There's a certain pathway that the federal government has said is the right path. And so it's just frustrating to me because I think there's so many paths and we need to be focused on outcomes and we need to be focused on getting folks into jobs. And if you can do that, that'll be part of the solution.

Jason Altmire [\(18:03\)](#):

I do think that you're exactly right that that is still a problem and has traditionally been a problem, especially at the national level, but I do feel like they're starting to get it. There are politics around for-profit schools and different issues related to regulation and so forth. But I think there is agreement on the idea that the traditional four-year path is not the most appropriate way or even the most valuable way for society, for every student to take. It used to be that if you didn't go to a four-year degree, somehow you were taking a lesser valued path. I don't necessarily feel that that's the way now. Would you agree? I think people are starting to understand there is a role for career schools in this.

Cheryl Oldham [\(18:48\)](#):

I think people are starting to see that. And I think the language is moving that way. The messaging is moving that way. I still think we have a ways to go because we need to build the system that supports it. So we talk and we're moving this way ourselves to talk more and more and we're supporting the employer community talk more and more about a skills-focused talent system. Not just hiring, skills-based hiring, yes, but the whole thing.

[\(19:18\)](#):

But it doesn't mean that four-year programs are going away, or it's not suggesting that we need to remove degree requirements for every single job, but we should be looking at where we can remove them and where other credentials of value are appropriate. And I think the business community hosted

a dinner a couple months ago and we had companies all around the table and they were all lots of commitment to that idea. We certainly have got, I think, some work to do to get everything we need to do to make that system work optimally. But I do think so.

[\(19:59\)](#):

And again, I try to stay away from the idea that like, we're just going to get rid of four-year colleges and universities. No, there's a place for that. I mean, I've got an N of one in my own house, which is a son who went to college for a year and was like, "Yeah, this did not work for me." And so now is figuring out the path that is going to be most appropriate for him. And I certainly want a system in place, I want employers there who are going to value the experience and education that he does get and that he has opportunities that are beyond that traditional pathway.

Jason Altmire [\(20:37\)](#):

I think, related to that, I wanted to close by asking you, you've been a leader. America Works Initiative in particular has focused on the role of women in the issues that we're talking about. You have a discussion on your website about why 1 million women are missing from the workforce and you get into a lot of issues related to childcare and other things. And before we close, I did want to give you a chance to talk about that. What is the role of women and what are you at the Chamber doing to help address that issue?

Cheryl Oldham [\(21:09\)](#):

Well, thank you so much for letting me talk about it because it is not just near and dear to me because I've got my own kids, but this issue of childcare, I think has come into such sharper focus for the nation post-COVID. We had been working on this pre-COVID and really bringing the issue of childcare before the business community, making the business case for why the employer community needed to be more engaged in childcare. And then COVID hit. And obviously I think everybody saw much more clearly why this wasn't just an individual parent or families issue to manage, that there are real economic implications for a community, for a state, for the nation when childcare breaks down. When you don't have a childcare solution, you cannot go to work. And we don't have a optimally functioning childcare system in this country. And we have, over the last few years, gone state by state and done some original research quantifying the economic impact to states when childcare breaks down. Texas is an example. It costs them about nine to \$10 billion a year. And what happens when you do that work is then you motivate and you mobilize the business community lawmakers around this issue. And it's critically important.

[\(22:36\)](#):

We saw women... Men returned to the workforce at a much faster pace than women did. And I think it's very clear that care responsibilities, whether it's childcare or elder care, women just bear the bulk of that burden. And so, for us, it's issues of accessibility to childcare, affordability of childcare, but then a key piece is flexibility of childcare. And that's, I think, one of the bigger issues that we have when we talk about these issues at the federal level where you've got one side that wants it to be a federal solution. Everybody needs to go this particular pathway. It's your child. You absolutely need to have flexibility in selecting the type of environment that works best for you, and you are going to be a better worker when you know your kid is safe and thriving while you are off doing what you love.

[\(23:35\)](#):

And so it's a really important issue and we're working with a bipartisan policy center on some in-State work to help address to create that system within, I think we're at 13 to 14 states now to address the

childcare issues. And it's coming up as a really important issue right now as we're looking at chip manufacturing in the CHIPS legislation because there are some federal requirements that the business community must ensure access to quality, affordable childcare if they're going to get those federal dollars. And so it has placed a mandate on the employer community that while we wouldn't necessarily ask for it, we're certainly committed to trying to make it work for communities because really important issues. So thank you for letting me talk a little bit about that.

Jason Altmire ([24:24](#)):

It's such an important issue and I'm glad you were able to talk about it.

([24:28](#)):

Our guest today has been Cheryl Oldham. She is the Vice President of Education Policy at the US Chamber of Commerce, and she is the Senior Vice President of the Education and Workforce Program of the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation.

([24:42](#)):

Cheryl, if somebody wanted to learn more about the America Works Initiative or get in touch with you to talk more about it, how would they do it?

Cheryl Oldham ([24:50](#)):

They can get in touch with me at coldham@uschamber.com, or they can Google America Works Us Chamber of Commerce and it'll come right up.

Jason Altmire ([25:02](#)):

Cheryl Oldham, thank you for being with us.

Cheryl Oldham ([25:05](#)):

Thank you, Jason.

Jason Altmire ([25:14](#)):

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