In this episode, Producer Doug Foresta interviews Kristin Wolff about the impact of COVID-19 on WDQI and partner data projects. The two barely take a breath in this impromptu chat about the crises and opportunities the pandemic has made evident, and the vastly expanded stakeholder networks and partner ecosystems engaged in solutions work. So many references! Here are a few: BrightHive, SPR’s trusted partner in the WDQI effort Research Improving People’s Lives (RIPL) The Coleridge Initiative/Administrative Data Research Facility (ADRF) GovLab DataKind Jobs for the Future (JFF) Civic Software Foundation WDQI Round VI Highlights (Summer 2020): https://wdqi.workforcegps.org/resources/2020/08/24/23/53/WDQI-Webinar-Round-VI-Accomplishments For more information: Sign up for the #MakingBetterWork Newsletter: https://mailchi.mp/903537e424bb/mbwnews US Department of Labor’s WDQI Effort: https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/eta/eta20190722 Community of Practice/WorkforceGPS: https://wdqi.youth.workforcegps.org/ Social: @kristinwolff @Social_Policy SPR on Facebook #MakingBetterWork Credits: Produced with support from the US Department of Labor’s WDQI Technical Support Project and (fantastic) Doug Foresta.
Oh, yeah. Indeed. I know you might think it would be a little bit kind of isolated, you know, because it's kind of you know the nuts and bolts of building data systems but alas, you know, I guess. So, I'll start here. So, earlier in the week, we had a showcase that featured a really compelling set of products that states have been working on, including some sort of public facing tools and decision support systems and that's the work they had been doing and so it was sort of revealed in the showcase, and we'll be sure to include a link, it's pretty cool. But in terms of sort of day-to-day work now. It's all about UI claims processing, everybody that was working on almost anything at any Department of Employment in any state has been pulled on to UI claims processing so that's really commanded the attention and right rightly so. The other thing and sort of here's the opportunity in it, is that the crisis itself has created this real immediate and serious need for the kind of information that states have been developing systems to produce right so, so it's interesting, you know, I don't know, as I guess as recently as, you know even a few months ago, you know, the unemployment numbers would come out but the economy had been strong for a decade and, you know, so I guess they you know they would make the news amongst those who cared or whatever but it wasn't sort of a dinner table obsession. And right now, you know, aside from the COVID infection rates UI claims and unemployment rates are probably the most viewed set of data in the country, and so it's just created a real appetite amongst so many for exactly the kind of data that these states are producing so, so, you know, finally we're seeing a much wider much more widely recognized value of workforce system data so that's, that's kind of cool.

So, you know, one of the organizing principles or one of the themes that's come up over and over as you talk to the States is about the future of work. What about you know what's going on with that I said it feels like it's either the future is now or the apocalypse is now but what's going on with in terms of that future work conversation?

Well, yeah, it's, it's a whole new future of work that's for sure. But, you know, one thing that's really important to understand is that the crisis has so disrupted labor markets that understanding what they look like going forward is going to be crucial for me, from here to the foreseeable future. So, you know there'll be some models of understanding labor market activity from the past that will hold but others are just going to be, you know, they're going to be pretty suspect. So the, that's kind of where the, the conversation around the future of work is shifting is, you know, understanding changes in whole sectors that are that are impacted deeply like food and hospitality. You know what, what our food and hospitality sectors going to look like going forward and, you know, we've already seen really sad reports of, you know, large scale closures of permanent closures of restaurants and food establishments and so forth going forward so that that sector may look quite different. And so, data will be you know, critical there. Another aspect is safety, you know, across all sectors but in particular in the care sectors like health care and childcare and eldercare and even in schools. So, you know, how, how those jobs shift and sort of how the demand for those jobs shift that, that also you know that's going to really impact,
sort of what the data looks like in a turn that data is going to tell us a lot about, about how those industries are changing. And then there's, you know, tech and other high growth sectors where we've seen less dramatic impact, but where skill and talent gaps were evident, before the crisis and those remain, it's just going to be interesting to try and understand that too. And then another thing that I think it'll be interesting as platform work like what happens to you know the gig economy effectively, Uber, Airbnb, you know, food delivery all that there's been an emergence I think less covered, you know, sort of less than the popular media, there's been a large-scale emergence of kind of professional platforms. So, you know, not just food delivery but all manner of professional services and so, you know it'll be interesting to see how that sector plays out like what, you know what will be the role of platform-based employment in a world where remote employment is more common, and what kinds of opportunities, is that going to open up, including for, you know caregivers at home or people with disabilities and so there may be new opportunities. You know in that so that's kind of where the future of work conversation is shifting for the minute obviously underpinning all of that was the conversation about automation and AI and, and that's a bit of a mixed bag to, you know, we're seeing sort of some reports of acceleration of automation in large measure because that helps things like manufacturing plants be more safe, right more robots, less people. And so you see that, but then at the same time, you know that that's not a quick process so firms that were already hit that had already made investments large scale investments in that kind of automation were more prepared, and that and that's the same thing as the same thing in terms of just basic operations kind of technology like, you know, office 365 and teams and zoom and you know all of that and so we also hear reports about just the move home has so vastly accelerated the kind of the progress on more flexible working that firms have been preparing for, for a long time so it's sort of a head spinning speed that that that happened. But, yeah, and then, you know, data underpins really all that, you know, sort of big questions about. As the economy comes back, how does it come back, you know, what's the role for equity inclusion quality jobs livable wages are their new business models, you know, all of that.

[Doug Foresta] 6:56
It's going to be more important than ever, isn't it? Because people are really going to want to know people, organizations, governments are really going to want to know right like they're really going to want to know and you bring up an interesting point about equity and inclusion, like, that's going to be. I mean it already was a highlighted area focus right but it's going to be probably even more so.

[Kristin Wolff] 7:16
Yeah, I think so and, you know, one, one issue to watch here I think is going to be apprenticeship. And the reason for that is because what you know not across all sectors and certainly not all occupations, but in many, we will see the jobs themselves get reinvented or substantial portions of those jobs get reinvented, whether it's for, you know, the sort of demands around safety and physical contact or, you know, or whether it's because the sector itself has shifted and there's more automation but, you know, we will see new jobs and new jobs emerge, and the quickest way to develop training for those new jobs is to do it at the same time and that's exactly what apprenticeship does, so you could in theory be inventing jobs and inventing the training to support them at the same time through apprenticeship, so
it's a really interesting model, because of that and then the other assets it offers I think are that you
know at a time of of austerity where there just isn't going to be, you know the kind of incomes that
people had been pulling in before and where families may have, you know, tapped their, their savings
and so forth, it there's big questions about whether families are going to have the appetite for four year
college degrees. So that's another issue, let alone whether those whether colleges will even open
physically in the fall right so that's another issue, you know, paint, paint earn and learn strategies right
apprenticeship is an earned learn strategy and so. So that's another, another really interesting piece,
and then, and then finally I guess even the, you know apprenticeship is a model that draws heavily on
mentoring, and one of the things that's always needed in terms of the reinvention of jobs in the
workplace is the pulling of knowledge from, you know people who have been in the workplace for a long
time, and integrating it into new jobs and work and that's basically innovation right it's like new ideas,
collide with old and new processes are developed and apprenticeship, the training itself is based in a
mentoring model so that's kind of exactly what it is. And so, so I think that's a really interesting
intervention to watch going forward, especially at this time.

[Doug Foresta] 9:27

So, you've already addressed this to some extent, Kristin, but you know what, what's some of the silver
lining here, some of the opportunities that you think may come out of all this?

[Kristin Wolff] 9:38

You know, it's so hard to be an optimist right now but I do think there are, there are a lot of
opportunities, and, you know, I'll take this in two ways. So, starting with the, the data systems in
particular the sort of the community of practice that this podcast is, is sort of designed to serve. I think
the timing is really good for sort of the growth and development of the kinds of programs that the
Workforce Data community is putting in place. So, you know, for example, within states; the whole idea
of WDQI and of these kind of longitudinal data systems is connecting data so that we can derive more
intelligence more insight from the data that everyone is collecting by, by connecting it right safely and
with adequate privacy concerns but, but within states, the network effects are finally kicking in, you
know, it used to be that that data collaboration or data partnerships, referred to the wheel a partner so
the public employment training partners, and the colleges maybe, maybe higher ed or maybe K through
12 But that was kind of the universe, but, but now we see corrections, SNAP, EBT, TANF, apprenticeship,
even Medicaid are increasingly partners in these statewide data collaboratives. And that's it, you know,
in large measure because the effect of contributing your data when other data is already there, makes
the total pool of data much more valuable right like that's the network effect. So that's kicking in. And
then at the same time, you know state's state budgets are, you know, dire, at this point and, and they
don't look to be improving anytime soon. And so, there just isn't going to be the appetite to maintain a
plethora of separate longitudinal data systems, you know independently that don't connect with one
another so, so, so there's an opportunity and then I also think, you know, some really important
opportunities exist within the larger ecosystems. There are these new partners that are external to
states you know like universities and research labs civic tech organizations. We have many of them on
this podcast Bright Hive and Ripple and Coleridge, Data Kind, there's a lot of them, and you know they
they largely started in the spaces that could easily be mapped like transit, you know, but now they're moving into the workforce and ed space, and that is exciting. And then even you know sort of another threat of that has to do with all the kind of evidence-based practice organizations and communities, and they too are getting kind of less researching, you know, they're looking for kind of applied data, data use, making the insights that are available in all this data connectivity available to more people. And so that's a, you know that's another one and, you know, we see that in efforts like opportunity insights and measure of America, you know, it's, it's exciting stuff. So, I think that's a really, that's a really exciting area that we'll see some development in. It is making me think of a, there's a Pew, Pew poll that I saw recently that had some astronomical number, you know, 90% or 85% or something, expect to see more civic and social innovation in this decade. And that's the kind of poll that you know a few years ago, that question would have gotten an eye roll or sort of a what do you mean by social innovation. What do you mean by civic innovation and now it's a, it's much more understood. And so, so that's really exciting and, you know, there's just, there's an endless number of partners here, even, you know, private shops like MC and Burning Glass, it was more collaboration between the public sector and those entities so, so that's exciting. Yeah, so that's a good read. Oh, another one is the ecosystems around certification and credentialing, also have a heavy data element and and are also connected to what we're talking about before in terms of models that will help people get back to work because those systems are about kind of stackable credentials which is sort of lingo for, how do you learn things that are additive, and that result in something that will communicate the value of what you know to someone else to an employer to a peer etc and so systems that do that are also seeing a lot of innovation and in many ways are tied to these data systems because we want to know which certifications matter. So, so that's another kind of exciting, you know, sort of place to watch for innovation and activity. And then I guess the whole world you know separate apart from the data. This data we're talking about is largely program data. It's about services, and an education programs that help people find work and realize their, you know, aspirations, and, and a lot of that is moving online. And what that means is, you know, what do we know about what works in that space, and also universal broadband, oh my goodness. If there is one thing that was brought to the fore, you know at the beginning of the COVID crisis, it was just that, you know, universal broadband should just not even be a discussion. I mean it... we had a situation after situation, community after community where public sector entities like colleges and schools and libraries were leaving their, their WIFI on so that people could use their parking lots, to, you know, help their kids do their homework and send it to teachers using Google. I mean, that that is just, we have got to solve that problem. That is just, it is just, I mean when all services all public services for the last several months have been delivered online. We have got to solve the universal broadband problem and a lot of people have been working on it and it's now, it's it's just, yeah, it needs to happen. So yeah, so those are, those are some areas I just feel like, you know, data is so critical to all things in this moment, because of the pace of change, we have to learn from what's happening now, so that we can recover better and, you know, data systems are at the heart of that, so yeah. So, I guess as you know as hard as this crisis is and as terrible it is on so many dimensions, but the public has a new appetite for data, and, and data partners and systems are sort of breaking down walls and establishing new practices in real time, and, and we're, you know, fundamentally changing how we educate our children what work is, and, and how we live and it's all happened in a matter of weeks. We know that change at this kind of scale can occur because we just did it. And so, having data about what works going forward, means that we can accelerate the good faster, coming out of this, and I think that's how we're going to tackle some of the,
the equity challenges in particular that have languished for a long time and that really need our attention right now.

[Doug Foresta] 16:42
Oh, thank you. Yes, that well said. So, so I guess my next question really is, you know what's coming up, what's next?

[Kristin Wolff] 16:49
Yeah, so I kind of feel like you know, here we are in 2020, it's one for the record books, and we're barely halfway there. But, but yeah, we were excited about what's coming. We have some guests from some of the organizations I mentioned, soon we'll have Justine Hastings from ripple on, she's working with some of our data projects in a number of states, some very exciting work on it I'm tempted to steal that thunder, but I will not, well I will say this. What's exciting about it is that data innovation isn't just going on in the Department of Labor or the Department of Ed, there's also quite a lot going on through the National Science Foundation that relates to this they have an initiative and accelerator initiative on the question of the future of work. So, what it's meant is that some of those accelerator projects are colliding now with the WDQI projects, and it's very exciting. And so, ripple is sort of at the heart of that there's many others Bright Hive, our partner on the project is also a part of that. We also see, you know, organizations like the Coleridge Institute, or the Coleridge initiative at NYU, and Julia Lane's group will have them on a podcast. We'll have Bright Hive again on a podcast so we're really excited and we're looking forward to kind of featuring states, and also states doing similar work, and also the sort of social innovators working on multi-state partnerships, and so those are that some of the things that, that we're really looking forward to. Aside from that, I just kind of feel like, you know, like everyone, we're just kind of trying to put one foot in front of the other, and, and contribute where we can, you know, to, to, to a better economy to, sort of, I like I like this hashtag going around this build back better. So, to that. That's what we're trying to do.

[Doug Foresta] 18:35
Love it. So, lots to look forward to even even amidst all the interesting times. And I love what you said about you know we don't have an excuse anymore about not being able to change or adapt because we, we just did it in six months and three months.

[Kristin Wolff] 18:50
Yep. Yes, we did. So that that gives me that gives me a lot of hope and and actually also that the public sector in particular and for all the challenges we had with with UI and the claims and how behind we are. And, you know, and the new programs and you know the support for small business. At the same time that happened in rapid fire pace. And I think, you know, we believe in the public sectors ability to
join hands with new partners and rise to this challenge and as far as we can tell they're doing their best and they are rising, you know, it's so I have a lot of hope. I have a lot of hope going forward.

[Doug Foresta] 19:25
Thanks so much Kristin. I'm looking forward to the future episodes and of course, just looking forward to the good things that will come out of all this.

[Kristin Wolff] 19:32
Indeed, stay healthy and take care of family.

[Narrator] 19:38
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