Episode #21: The Promise of Cloud Technology meets the Urgency of Now: Making the Most of the Pandemic, with Dr. Julia Lane

In this episode, we talk with Dr. Julia Lane, cofounder of the Coleridge Initiative—a program that aims to transform the way governments access and use data for social good. It's a wide-ranging discussion covering major themes in Julia’s new book, Democratizing Our Data: A Manifesto, new public data demands sparked by the COVID crisis, as well as strategies for meeting urgent needs in the short term while building better systems infrastructure over time. Julie sees both critical urgency and limitless potential for using data more effectively to inform public policy, program designs, and the sequence and timing of interventions to produce better outcomes for people and communities. So many references! And we’ve got you covered: Democratizing Our Data: A Manifesto (2020) The Coleridge Initiative/Administrative Data Research Facility (ADRF) Training ADRF Collaborators National Convening: Jobs Data for Evidence-Based Policy (Information & Registration) Origins of the Unemployment Rate: The Lasting Legacy of Measurement without Theory, David Card (2011) Burning Glass Jobs Data NASWA Breaking New Ground Foundations Catalyzing Change in the Public Data Space: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Schmidt Futures Overdeck Family Foundation Morrill Act and Land Grant Colleges/Agricultural Extension Programs For more information: Sign up for the #MakingBetterWork Newsletter: https://mailchi.mp/903537e424bb/mbwnews Community of Practice/WorkforceGPS: https://wdqi.youth.workforcegps.org/ Email Julia: lane@coleridgeinitiative.org Email Kristin: Kristin_Wolff@spra.com Social: @kristinwolff @Social_Policy SPR on LinkedIn #MakingBetterWork Credits: Produced with support from the US Department of Labor’s WDQI Technical Support Project and (fantastic) Doug Foresta.

Transcription

[Narrator] 0:02
Welcome to Making Better Work, the podcast where we explore how connecting people and data can help us navigate the future of work. And now here's your host, Kristin Wolff.

[Kristin Wolff] 0:13
We made it to 2021. Welcome back to Making Better Work, our podcast and our life's work really never more so than today, although the calendars changed and a working vaccine is being distributed as we speak, we do not underestimate the health, economic, social, environmental and political challenges that lie ahead, tackling them starts with data; distributed, accessible, shared and applied data so that people charged with making decisions about where and how we solve problems can act with the knowledge of what came before and ensure that what they learn is interred paid forward, that's using data for good, and it's why we’re here. We believe the responsible use of data can help us find our way to a more equitable human centered future of work that lives up to people's talents, dreams and ambitions, and the government well far from me on the actor has an important role to play. At the center of our listener community are some amazing public sector data stewards in 18 states and their civic tech data science research partners, all working together on the US Department of Labor’s Workforce Data Quality Initiative. Together they're building the systems and tools employers workers
and students will count on more than ever going forward. This podcast is for them for you and others like you using data to build back better in the wake of COVID-19. Thank you for showing up and for making better work every day. I'm Kristin Wolff your host at Social Policy Research Associates, SPR is a research and technical assistance consultancy in the workforce and education space based in Oakland, California. Today, we're talking with Dr. Julia Lane. Julia is a professor at the NYU Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, NYU Center for Urban sciences in progress, and a fellow for innovation analytics, she co-founded the Coleridge Initiative whose goal is to transform the way governments access and use data for social good. See, right up our alley. Julia has held prestigious leadership positions at the American Institutes for Research, The National Science Foundation, the Urban Institute, the World Bank, American University and the University of Chicago. She’s received numerous awards for her work nationally and internationally and published over 80 articles and leading economics journals. Julia serves as a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the International Statistical Institute and the American Statistical Association. She’s written or edited nearly a dozen books, including one we’ll talk about today. And that seems like a good place to start. Julia, welcome to Making Better Work. We’re thrilled to have you here and we’d like to start by asking you about your new book, Democratizing our Data: a manifesto. There are so many books about data and even more about data for good and last few years, but not too many connect data to democracy, especially in the form of a manifesto. Democratizing our data came out in 2020. You wrote the foreword though I noticed after the COVID-19 crisis began. So, what's the main message of your book and why is it urgent enough to take the form of an explicit call to action, especially today?

[Julia Lane] 2:54

So, thank you very much for having me on. I’m delighted to be here. So, you correctly point out, there's been a lot of interest in data in the, in the last few years. I think to some extent what this book is about is trying to synthesize a lot of the issues and say, not just identify what the problems are, but let's figure out what to do about it, and in particular, what's the role of state and local agencies in helping to create what I think are pretty much as a disruptive change, and that's why it's called a manifesto, you know, what are we going to do. So, essentially what the first three chapters are saying the current system is fairly, clearly broken. I've been involved with the federal government, state and local for over 20 years, many of you will know me from establishing that LED program, the local employment dynamics program joint with states and the Census Bureau. And, you know, that was a disruptive change it's had a big impact I think one of the things I started to think about is, why don't we have more of that, why is that still the kind of the flagship activity and part of it is our systems are currently the main messages. Our systems are currently set up to answer questions of last century. In fact, the Great Depression and World War Two and the world’s changing so quickly, we really need to rethink how we do public data delivery, you pointed out COVID I think the book was written before COVID. But COVID has identified how broken our current system is, we need local timely information about employment, we need information that is actionable by local workforce boards by governor's offices and so on. And the current system isn't producing them, but we have the data at hand, in many many cases, and that's what the book talks about, and it kind of argues that we need to rethink what we do. So to kind of finalize, even though the book was written before COVID. Obviously when COVID hit, I wrote that forward and said, yeah, here we are, we have an opportunity to rethink the way in which we do business.
[Kristin Wolff] 5:14

It's just, I read it in the last couple of days and after you know I've sort of been sitting their kind of teasing me for the last month or so and I've read it last couple of days and I also found it like so inspiring. I was also glad though that the intro was written sort of post-COVID because it felt like such a nice bridge. So anyway, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it myself but what's it been like to try to get the word out during a global pandemic, I mean I can imagine, there's no in person gatherings or sort of coffee shop talks, you know, as there has been in the past, but on the other hand, vastly more opportunities to reach out to new people because nearly everything is occurring online. So, what's been the response has anything surprised you?

[Julia Lane] 5:51

Actually, you hit the nail on the head, everyone's moved online, so actually the reach is much broader than it was before where everything had to be in person. I think also the urgency, and the interest in jobs, and we thinking the way in which we work with data has focused everyone's attention. So, there's this voracious demand for new approaches, and people are going online to try and find out answers. So, I've been on a lot of podcasts, this one is an example in which I think the potential to get the message out, is much broader than it was before. Combine that with the interest in the new administration, and the recognition that this job situation isn't going to fix itself anytime soon. And the pandemic in some senses, for some to force multiply the message.

[Kristin Wolff] 6:43

Indeed. That might be a nice segue actually to your work with the Coleridge Initiative. So, I think some of our listeners will be familiar but many won't be. Can you tell us about the Coleridge Initiative and what it seeks to achieve?

[Julia Lane] 6:56

That's another great question so we never set out to do what we ended up doing we've kind of been done by the interest of the community, how it all started was about five years ago with the Commission on evidence-based policymaking was set up in March of 2016. And the goal was, how can we do an institute better system to collect data to inform policy. We were asked to set up a secure environment where by confidential data could be combined and used, we set that up but of course you also want to set up a way in which people can work with the data. And so, we also instituted training. Our goal was to do two things, provide a secure environment, and to build the capacity to work with data, and it's just kind of grown from there it was initially set up to be a demonstration project, and the demand has just made it grow like crazy so that's kind of how it came to be.
So, you've mentioned and for listeners who aren't aware, the Commission on evidence-based policy was a federal initiative, with the aim of kind of exactly what it says, creating better ways to bring evidence to decision making a policy setting. And so, you've mentioned this idea of sort of sharing data or combining data several times, and I wonder if you could just explain why that's so important and what gets in the way.

Well, if you think about it, people are complex and their societal and economic interactions are complex, so when you think about a particular program, typically, individuals in order to figure out what the impact of a program is you need to understand how people's interaction with other programs is occurring. Let me give you an example. If I invest in a training program, I also would like to know is that individual receiving other training through Tanner, for example, welfare. Have they emerged from a corrections program? Have they received aid in other sources? So, the basic idea there is, can I connect data across multiple programs so that I get the full effect of government investment in an individual or in an area, rather than just a single one-dimensional analysis. The second piece is being able to look at what happens to that individual as they move across state lines, we know there's even though, state data systems, in that the state border, people routinely move across state lines. And so being able to capture for example, in Cincinnati, Ohio, whether they're getting jobs in Kentucky, or Indiana, which they border helps understand the return to investment in, for example, education. So, the importance of being able to share data across agencies and across states is critical to informing the value of the investment in a particular policy.

Okay, so I see that, and what typically gets in the way I mean there's a lot of discussion about data sharing and, you know, some concern about privacy, you know what gets in the way when states, try to initiate these kinds of data sharing agreements?

So there have been, as you will know, hundreds of articles and books and conferences about what gets in the way. One of the biggest problems is the legal issues, the difficulty in sharing data across state and agency lines, quite simply because it's difficult to track what happens to the data agency A sends it over to agency B. You don't know what happened. So, the advantage the technological advances that we were able to exploit, five years ago and ever since then, is the ability to work with data in the cloud that breaks through a major barrier because state agencies can monitor and track every single access and use of the data, and that breaks down a huge amount of barriers. The second barrier is not knowing what's in the data. So, you want to build understanding by bringing people together from the different states and the different agencies, so that they know what's in each other's data and can share knowledge about the idiosyncrasies, as much administrative data is not documented, because it's used to
administer programs, not necessarily for analytical purposes. So, building a knowledge community around the data is the second big barrier, and that's why we put the training passes. So, the combination of being able to knock down the legal barriers because you can control access and use of the data through stewardship in the cloud. And then the second is to build the value proposition for the data through the training passes, those were the two big barriers that we were able to knock down,

[Kristin Wolff] 11:56

That's really exciting. And now, I'd love to sort of talk about it in a specific context. So you've been involved in labor markets and socio-economic mobility, data and issues and policy for a long time. That's how we first connected.

[Julia Lane] 12:10

That's right. [cross talk] I don't want to say how long ago that was.

[Kristin Wolff] 12:16

Indeed, indeed. So, if you think about sort of drawing the Venn diagram between public data, jobs and workforce and COVID recovery, what are the opportunities you see today?

[Julia Lane] 12:30

Well, I think it's a massive opportunity. So, recall, the impact of this COVID has been local there's vast differences in how the pandemic has affected jobs and economic activities at the county level, and very, very different at different times and in different industries, and in different occupations and the heterogeneity is massive. These are not problems that can be addressed at the national level. Got to be addressed at the state and local level. You've got to have the data sources. Where are they from, they're coming from the state and local level, the unemployment insurance benefits information is administered by the state wage records, administered by the state, TANF data administered by the state. The education data administered by the state, and used to inform, state and local actions. So, the importance of being able to get the data, not once a month, or, you know, with a quarter delay, but being able to generate information now is absolutely critical, and we need to mobilize to ensure that the resources are allocated to state and local government, led jobs in this time of crisis so we really need to mobilize, in response to this jobs crisis, we need to do it now we need to get resources allocated to state and local government agencies, build the capacity to respond to what's going to be a crisis for the next several years, and we need to do it now.

[Kristin Wolff] 14:20
Where is this happening now, can you sort of give us some specific examples of states that have responded, you know with vigor to this set of challenges?

[Julia Lane] 14:29

They're a simple state, a set of states we've been working with most closely have been in the Midwest, but we are working with a number of states across the country. I'll talk about that in a minute but let me talk very specifically about what the Midwestern Collaborative has been doing, they combine forces, figured out how to work with the promise files to get information at the individual level, about who was claiming unemployment benefits occupation industry developed dashboards, looked at the excerpts from unemployment insurance benefit claims, and really have pooled resources to build a high-quality information tool for their workforce boards.

[Kristin Wolff] 15:11

So, track that all the way through, then what does that allow the workforce boards or others using that data to do?

[Julia Lane] 15:18

It enables them to target their resources to the groups of individuals, most in need of them, they can understand which industries have been hit. Most sharply at an individual county level. Who's exiting more quickly? Who's languishing on the rolls? Not just by looking at a cross section of individuals, but looking at cohorts, you can structure the data to look at weekly experiences as different cohorts move through time and see what happens to groups of individuals who entered in March or who entered in June or who entered in July by different industries and by different occupations, so it gives a much more complex understanding of what the impact, the long term impact both the long term and the short term impact of the current economic crisis has been.

[Kristin Wolff] 16:16

Wow I can see... [cross talk]

[Julia Lane] 16:19

What's been very cool about that and I promised I'd say something is ETA has sponsored a set of classes, to work through a set of applied data analytics classes to show participants from 30 states from LMI shops, UI shops, education shops in 30 different states so that they can use modern techniques like machine learning, and cohort analysis and predictive analytics to see how to study the process in their own states.
That is amazing, and I can see how, especially now, the idea of really specific interventions for cohorts would be hugely important because states have had such different policies and because industries and sectors, and even place based economies have been subject at different times to different policies so I can see how that would be so useful in the moment.

We were absolutely thrilled. When I talk about this whole process being led by the demand from the States. I'm not kidding you, we originally had planned for one class, with a maximum capacity of 25 because that's why we run the applied data analytics classes because they work with their own micro data it's very hands on very intense kind of training program. We ended up having over 140 applicants from 30 states. So, we ended up doing four classes, rather than one.

Wow, that's amazing. I'm going to come back to this in a second but I also want to ask, it seems like, in addition to responding to the crisis in the moment, essential important, you know, can't say enough about it. It also strikes me that the approach you're talking about could also change how we conduct longer term research, and so I wondered, but now we do a lot of, you know, studies... a program work under what circumstances for whom. Typically, they, they may be, you know, during the course of the program or a little bit after they take a long time to produce, and it seems to me the kind of data infrastructure, you're talking about really changes how you can answer the question, what's working and why and I wondered if you could talk about that a little bit.

So, I think one of the things to think about here is not just how we do analysis, Kristin, it is what we measure. So, let me use unemployment, as an example. So, the measure of unemployment, which we currently use is actively looking for work. And that was developed in 1937. If you go back and take a look at David Card's article. So, go and Google at David Card, and Google measures of unemployment, there was just an ad Hoc approach that was developed, you know, somewhat arbitrarily he argues, and we've been using that ever since it's got all kinds of nice properties it's use nationally it's longitudinal inconsistent and so on. But is that really the measure that we want to be able to be using now. Are there other measures that we could think about that would complement, not replace or complement the unemployment measures that we currently have? We have unemployment claims, which has direct implications for people who were working, and who are not currently working. They have implications for the governance Trust Fund for funding for training, all kinds of policies of interest that are not answered by the question, are you actively looking for work. It is questions about, are you getting money that may or may not disappear. That may or may not be affecting your spending, that may or
may not be affecting your eligibility for other transfer programs. And so we could be thinking about how to take data that we other data sources from administrative records that could change the questions that we ask, not just change the way in which we develop evidence-based policy. So, I think there's lots and lots of other things that we can do that we can be rethinking now, rather than working with measures that are 80 years old, and may no longer be applicable to a modern economy.

[Kristin Wolff] 20:47

Okay track that through like you did for me before. So, if we adopted higher quality measures more current measures, what could happen, who does that make a difference for and how track it sort of all the way through.

[Julia Lane] 21:00

So, we want to be careful about using the term higher quality. Quality is a multi-dimensional set of characteristics right. So, one of them and the one I was emphasizing is timeliness and impact, it may not be as high quality in other dimensions. So, along the dimensions that I think are important in the COVID crisis, it is high quality but maybe not, more generally. Tracking through what we might be interested in. Here's what we're able to get from the promise files for UI claims data, we're able to get people's education, occupation, place of residence, previous industry, previous earnings, not by asking a question, but from the actual experience. So, from that point of view, it's much higher quality than you might get from a survey question. The other proposition that you get is that it is much more granular in scope, because you've got 10s of 1000s, 100s or 1000s of people on whom you've got that data, not for example for a state where it might be 500 people in the entire state who were being asked the survey so that enables you to get to the level of geography, that's of interest to you can provide quite detailed reports to a workforce board about what's going on in their county, so they can design support services accordingly. So that's what makes, being able to think through what you can do with these new data much more creatively than just saying, oh, well, we're stuck with one set of measures that have been around since 1937.

[Kristin Wolff] 22:40

I just want to underscore that first point in particular this is a very big deal this is the equivalent of moving from in product terms and sort of customer product terms you know do you like this color to the color you actually choose and being able to measure the difference between those two. That's sort of a, an analogue in the consumer space but doing that with data about jobs workforce and education is just, it's a huge game changer. So, I just want to kind of underscore that point.

[Julia Lane] 23:08

And I want to jump in again. That's exactly the right analogy, and not even just think about an administrative record this morning I was talking with Burning Glass. And so, what they're doing is they're
using job postings data to figure out what’s the demand side, in real time so obviously companies, posting information about job listings, you can figure out the occupation, the industry, earnings, the job skills that are needed. And so, you’ve got information about the demand just like the UI benefits information gives you information about a portion of the supply. So, now workforce boards, not only just have the supply side, but they potentially have the demand side as well. And that's really going to help them with decision making. Now there's a whole other set of questions that come up right, because you have to figure out, well, what are the industry definitions that are being used by Burning Glass, you have to pay money for it, you have to figure out what the occupations mean, you have to figure out what the coverages. So, there's a whole set of framing issues that come in, but they can be dealt with. And I think the value proposition is potentially so great that even though the measure is not perfect. So going back to Kristin, to your point on quality, it's kind of it's something where before we have very little. And so going back again to your point, thinking about a new opportunity, a way of thinking about describing and characterizing labor markets that opens a whole new door into understanding how to provide services is the change that we now have available to us.

[Kristin Wolff] 24:42

This is amazing. In a similar way as the product analogy. This would allow this kind of sort of discretionary information, this sort of granular information would allow really specific targeting and matching of people and jobs, not just the general generic broadcast of what opportunities are available or what occupations are available, but a real connection between people who have skills and qualifications for specific jobs and employers who have those specific needs that would just allow a level of targeting and connection that we've just never been able to achieve so that's really, really exciting. So, the kinds of shifts we've talked about are really huge and fundamental and consequential and so I wondered, what are some of the things that governments at different levels federal, state, local, can do to accelerate progress here.

[Julia Lane] 25:32

Well, there's a bunch of things. So, first of all, I think the focus on simply data is misplaced. People have to realize that the path forward is getting data is the first step, understanding how to work with the data and make sense of the data and create useful measures, and reliable measures out of the data is really where a lot of the investment needs to come. And so, whereas before, and again referring back to your change analogy, whereas before we were handed down data from the federal system. And that's what we could use, because it had already been curated and taken care of. That was them. This is now the reality now is we've got the sea of data which we have to make sense of. We need to invest in the professional development of the workforce, and making sure that they are empowered to create new measures that make sense to share data across agency and state lines, and to bring in new sources of data that they can test and evaluate for the purposes of doing their jobs. That's where the investment needs to occur.

[Kristin Wolff] 26:46
And is there a role here for other actors as well, maybe foundations or professional associations or even research and technical support providers like SPR, think tanks universities who are the other players in this mix and what should they be doing?

[Julia Lane] 26:59

So clearly philanthropic foundations have been catalyst, the Gates Foundation, Smith's Futures over deck assembly, Flown Foundation, and so on. They've been catalysts in getting us over that tipping point. So, to demonstrate the value of investment in both data access and training, but realistically, what needs to happen is, in the longer term, you can't expect philanthropic foundations to be funding things ad infinitum, they can be the initial catalyst once things proven, there needs to be line funding from the feds to state and local agencies, just like the employment projections and associated obviously with professional development I think bears was being quite active in that as has ETA. Combine that with establishing training programs through state universities in collaborating with the state agencies, we have a precedent for that and in the book, I talk about it. The Moral Act in the 1880s, established the land grant universities, which included ag extension programs to train farmers how to use new ideas and new research to improve agricultural productivity. I think we need the equivalent of a moral act for extension programs, to teach state agencies how to work with the new data that could be combined with the universities. Plus, invest in secure environment, so that the data can be safely and confidentially access for news. So, it's those two things, the equivalent of an ag extension program for universities and agencies to work together to build up a real data science capacity using confidential data in a secure environment through like a national lab system, whereby the data can be accessed and used by multiple agencies multiple states.

[Kristin Wolff] 28:53

Well, that is a pretty exciting vision Julia, let's transition here you know it's a new year promises to be another very challenging one, but what are some of the things you're looking forward to in the short term, either your own professional trajectory or the broader fields in which you touch some of the things you just mentioned, what's on deck for this year, what are you excited about?

[Julia Lane] 29:13

Well, I think there's a couple of things one is the potential for the Midwest collaborative, to be joined by Eastern collaborative, I know New Jersey's B and Rutgers have been working together to get a consortium of eastern states, I believe they're similar activities for the southern and the western states. So, I would very much hope to see a set of regional collaboratives come together, we have a workshop March third through fifth to kind of facilitate that activity and maybe you could provide a link to that somewhere, Kristin. I'm looking forward to a set of regional collaboratives emerging and setting an agenda year, I'd really like to see the new administration, get serious about addressing our jobs crisis and the ability of policy to respond to the jobs crisis. I think that's a massive opportunity in 2021 that we haven't had before. So those are the two things I'm super excited about the regional collaboratives and
the potential to get serious investment in the capacity of state and local governments to respond to these ongoing jobs crisis.

[Kristin Wolff] 30:21
Oh my gosh, indeed and underscore, Julia, it's really been a pleasure. I can't thank you enough. And before we close, I just like to invite you to share any last thoughts and help listeners learn more about you, Coleridge, ADRF and your whole body of work, where can people go to find out more?

[Julia Lane] 30:36
Thanks so much. So, the website is coloridgeinitiative.org and the workshop is mentioned miserably under the workshop tab, so you can find out about that much workshop, you can find out about our training programs under the training tab, and about the skill platform under the skill platform tab, so you'll get a sense of what we're working on. And feel free to email me, my email address is Julia.lane@coloridgeinitiative.org or Julia.lane@nyu.edu. And in case you're wondering, Coleridge Initiative is named after Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the great poet, and if you want to know why, send me an email and I'll explain.

[Kristin Wolff] 31:20
Okay now we're intrigued. [cross talk] Oh, this is great, and thanks so much to our producer, Doug Foresta and to you listeners for joining in, we think this work is pretty important and we're happy that you do too. Please check the show notes for links to the resources we mentioned today we'll put all of them there, along with a link to the newsletter that accompanies this series also called Making Better Work, and give us a rating, it helps us to know how to improve the show and how to help people like you find it so they can listen to. This is Kristin Wolff on Making Better Work. Let's make 2021 a lot better. What do you say, until next time take care of each other out there.

[Narrator] 31:56
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