

Jackie Foor (00:01)

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Ryan Newman (00:24)

This is Dare to Disrupt, a podcast about Penn State alumni who are innovators, entrepreneurs, and leaders, and the stories behind their success. I'm your host, Ryan Newman.

And on the show today is Jackie Four. Jackie is the executive director of the Consortium for Public Education, a nonprofit connecting schools with partners and resources to support students in preparing for their futures. The consortium functions as a catalyst for advancement in K-12 education and workforce development, partnering with dozens of school districts, employers, post-secondary institutions, and community organizations to impact thousands of students every year.

Jackie graduated from Penn State with a bachelor's in secondary education and received her master's in organizational leadership from Carlo University. Welcome Jackie to Dare to Disrupt. This is a first for us on the show today. You are our first guest representing a nonprofit. Thank you for joining us.

Jackie Foor (01:20)

Thank you for having me. That's a lot of pressure.

Ryan Newman (01:24)

Well, we'll start as we always do Jackie, which is at the beginning. If you wouldn't mind telling our listeners where you spent your early formative years and what your childhood was like.

Jackie Foor (01:33)

Most of my growing up was done here in McKeesport where I'm sitting right now. Grew up on top of a hill that had a lovely view all the way to downtown Pittsburgh on a few days of the year. And I say a few days of the year because the steel industry was in full force when I

was a child. And most of the time you could not see because of the pollution that was in the air. And then when I got to high school and the steel industry collapsed here, it was like somebody flipped a switch.

And you could see from my house down, clear downtown every single day. To me, that collapse of the steel industry is what has probably impacted my career more than any other event in my life because I lived through seeing my community just implode because of the disruption that that caused. I saw what it did to education, what it did to people's careers and futures. Most of the

the folks I went to high school with who went away to college never returned. Having gone to Penn State and then got, been in education, I came out and even though I was a chemistry teacher, could not find a job anywhere. And once again, because the steel industry had collapsed, there was no tax base to hire and people moved away. So they just didn't need to hire. But it put me into things adult ed. It put me into the, to the intersection between education and workforce.

and has really driven home to me the need to build robust workforces and help students gain a variety of skills that will help them negotiate those kinds of disruptions to the economy so that they aren't like those that I saw growing up that worked in the steel industry that lost their jobs and didn't know what to do next.

Ryan Newman (03:18)

I mean, it's really incredible. It reminds me a lot of what people, some people are prognosticating about our current situation as it relates to AI. So this will be a very interesting discussion paralleling your experience with the steel industry collapse with what we're experiencing today and your insights I'm sure will be valuable. And was your father in the steel industry when you were growing up and was it still robust when you went from high school on to college or were you starting to see cracks of deterioration occur before you even went to school?

Jackie Foor (03:44)

We were fortunate. My father started off right after graduation in the steel industry for like a year and then ended up like a lot of people in the Pittsburgh region going to work for Westinghouse, which was very fortunate for my family. It also helped me get a job when I was in college in manufacturing one summer, which also really helped open my eyes to workforce and this different skills that are needed to be successful.

Ryan Newman (04:09)

And how did you ultimately think about going on to places like Penn State?

Jackie Foor (04:12)

Ended up at Penn State because my dad went to Penn State and that's all I heard growing up. And it was either you go to Penn State or you find somebody else that's cheaper. Ended up at Penn State. Never really saw myself anywhere else. Reluctantly applied one other school because I was also told you need to have a backup just in case. Started off in, doesn't exist anymore, ceramic engineering, which I think now is more material science, still in the College of Earth and Mineral Science. And got to a point where I was like, I really like science and I still do.

But then I got to a point where I was like, really also want to do something where I feel like I'm being useful and helpful to other people. So I switched to education.

Ryan Newman (04:50)

And so you stepped foot on Penn State's campus. Can you talk about your initial forays into Penn State academics? What was it that interested you?

Jackie Foor (04:59)

Loved my classes. still, loved physics kicked my butt, but I loved it and really wish I had could have excelled a little bit more there. Very much an interest in chemistry. As I kept going on, I really struggled probably because I didn't have enough opportunity to experience what being an engineer meant. I struggled to see how what I was learning could be applied in the real world. But having been in school, I could see how science could be applied in education. So I think that's why

I sort of made that switch over. The rest of my time in my free time, I got very involved in THON. I loved that. That was way back when it was still in the White building and much smaller than it is right now. But I had a chance to do that and was really excited when then when my daughters went there and saw them get involved in THON as well. And was involved in the Greek system and it gave me my first opportunities really for leadership, which really ended up being important to me. I never knew that people really valued me as a leader before until I had those opportunities.

Ryan Newman (05:58)

And was coming back to Pittsburgh after graduation always something that you thought you would do or was there any question about that in your mind?

Jackie Foor (06:04)

Not necessarily. I actually spent a couple of years in central Pennsylvania in Altoona before I came back to Pittsburgh because that's where my husband is from. And then when his opportunities brought him back to Pittsburgh, I was okay with doing that. It was really difficult in the early 90s to find, economically things weren't great in a lot of places. It was, you you kind of took the jobs you could get where you could get

Ryan Newman (06:28)

And so how did that influence your first job out of school once you left Penn State?

Jackie Foor (06:32)

My first jobs out of school were cobbling together a lot of part-time jobs. I went to work initially for Altoona School District in adult education. Also did retail on the side and substitute teaching on the side. A lot of different things until I could find full-time work. But the thing when I was working in Altoona that really changed the trajectory of my career, I worked in a department.

for a person that did a lot of grant writing for the school district because we were federally and state funded and a lot of the programs we were doing in adult education got kind of caught up in that. And along the way, people figured out I could write. I don't like writing, but I can do it. And I think actually that science background really set me up well for grant writing because it's about making your case. It's about taking a lot of...

facts and data and information and building a case for why you should be the one that receives those dollars to do something. So when I was working for Altoona School District, I started on that path. And then when I moved to Pittsburgh, I worked at a career and technical school under another person who was a very good grant writer who took me under her wing. And I did even more of that there. Government grants are among the hardest ones to write because they are so nitpicky about what they want. But that, that

skill has opened every single door for me since then. Every time that I put down that I can be a grant writer, especially in this nonprofit space, they're like, can you? And I'm like, yes. I think every job I've had in the past 20 to 30 years, it's because of that skill.

Ryan Newman (08:04)

So what's interesting is even when you were sort of finding your way early on, you were doing adult education, we mentioned in Altoona, and then grant writing, both of which have really kind of come together with respect to what you're doing today. Before we get to what you're doing today, let's talk more about this grant writing piece because, you know, we all have encountered nonprofits who are trying to elevate their game. And one of the ways they try to elevate their game is to say, well, there's a lot of grant money out there, we should apply for some grants. What advice would you have?

with a, for a lower resourced organization trying to elevate their game and have impact and get grant dollars by virtue of grant writing.

Jackie Foor (08:41)

Today, honestly, it's about building partnerships. There are very few entities, whether they be foundations or government entities, that want to give grants to somebody who's doing things in isolation. And that is something that really has changed over time. You really have to make the case when you write your grants about how you are working with your community, how you're working with partners, how you're reaching across to build coalitions to affect change.

And if you are not building those partnerships along the way and have those organizations you can really cite in your grant about how you have good working relationships with them, you're probably not going to do very well. You also need, especially when you're talking foundations, and we're blessed in Southwestern Pennsylvania to have some very strong foundations, it's about building those relationships with those organizations as well. It's about

meeting when you can with the program officers, whether you're getting a grant or not, helping them to understand what your organization does, how you do it, why the way you do it is so much better or more effective than some other places or could be supportive or supplement what other places are doing it. But it's really those relationships are so key in the grant writing space. So it's not just about being able to be a good writer. It's also about building those partnerships and those relationships along the way.

Ryan Newman (10:06)

And so really it sounds like it's taking the long view and then really tapping into the network effect, which is a lot of hard work and takes a lot of time.

Jackie Foor (10:13)

Absolutely. Yeah. It's also about, you know, grants run out. And if it's really good work, you have to be thinking from even before you launch something, how are you going to sustain it? Working in this job and in a couple previous jobs, I've always been thinking about if this works, who's going to like it enough that they're going to continue to pay for it. And in that workforce development space, I'm always thinking about how corporations value what we're doing at some point and decide that yes, we need this to keep happening and we might sponsor it.

Ryan Newman (10:45)

Ultimately, you found your way to the Consortium for Public Education. Can you tell us what this organization is, its mission, and its history?

Jackie Foor (10:52)

We are celebrating 40 years this year. We're a nonprofit organization. We were originally founded by the Heinz Endowments and the Allegheny Conference on Community Development here in southwestern Pennsylvania, specifically in response to the collapse of the steel industry. At that time, we were part of the Mon Valley Education Consortium that all of the school districts that touched the Monongahela Valley from Pittsburgh all the way down to the West Virginia line were all being negatively impacted.

by the collapse of steel industry. Their tax base was disappearing, population was disappearing, and that those districts needed an outside organization, a nonprofit organization to help connect them to the resources that they need. We've evolved over the years and our mission today is to connect schools to their community so students have the opportunities, the resources, the experiences they need to plan for their futures because we know that schools

all by themselves want to do this, but generally don't have the staff or the ability to do this. We know on the other side too, businesses want to connect with K-12 schools as well. They don't have the capacity to do it. As an intermediary organization, be in the middle, help make those connections and help also sustain those connections so they're meaningful.

Ryan Newman (12:08)

Interesting. And when you first joined the organization, where was it in terms of its initial phase of mission and how has that evolved? You talked about how it's evolved over time, but where was it initially when you first got involved?

Jackie Foor (12:19)

Well, I actually have a kind of unique relationship to this organization. I worked here 20 years ago for the first time. I worked here for a couple of years 20 years ago. And at that time, under our founder, we were very much in the space of working with school districts and teams on systemic change in their schools. It wasn't as much focused on that intermediary between workforce and education at that time, but we would convene teams from districts

work with them over the course of the school years, they would identify a problem of practice or something that they wanted to improve in their organizations. And we would provide them with the support, try and connect them to the resources they might need and provide coaching along the way to keep them moving towards the solution. I left for a number of years, did some other work consulting work on my own, also worked for some other nonprofits, and then ran back into the founder of the organization. And because I had found myself back in the adult education space,

and the adult workforce space started to get frustrated because I was like, if we could help with these problems and give kids as they graduate a better start, we might not see them as adults coming back saying, I lost my job. don't know what to do. Linda Crouser, who founded this organization and I started to talk, I'm grateful to the state that she invited me back, which was about 12, 13 years ago now. And at that time we were just sort of starting more down this path of how do we connect workforce and education. In this region started to realize there

At that time, at least, there wasn't any organization that really was in that space and that it was a huge gap. So we put more and more of our time and resources into that, not only connecting them, but also we look very much at what are the skills teachers need to be better educators that will help them better prepare students for the future. So we invested a lot of time in project-based learning. And I have some staff members that are amazing and did a ton of education on their own in that.

and can provide that training to teachers. We also have had the opportunity to really jump into human centered design. And again, I've had staff work very much on that. We brought those skills together and taught teachers. We teach kids that. We really believe that those are the skills that young people need, and getting back to something you said earlier, to help them become really great users of things like AI.

You know, it's important for reading skills and math skills, but that's not our forte and schools can do that. But we also have to make sure that they're teaching kids to be problem solvers, critical thinkers, communicators, so that they can be very successful in the workplace, so that they can be discerning users of AI and other technologies. So while we're also helping them become aware of career opportunities in those pathways, we also want them to build the skills to be successful in both post-secondary education and career.

Ryan Newman (15:08)

What is interesting when you think about this idea of really providing that bridge between education and the workforce, how much of your time is spent just educating one side on what the other's needs are and vice versa? mean, how much of it is really just being on the front lines potentially of the workforce and then really communicating that to education institutions and then quite frankly, vice versa, being on the front lines of what's happening in education and making sure...

that the workforce piece, is it asymmetrical or is it symmetrical in terms of the way in which you serve as a central node connecting these two groups? And if so, what is the typical transmission information that you're sending back and forth?

Jackie Foor (15:48)

We often describe ourselves as translators because we know that education speaks an entirely different language than workforce. And so when we are in spaces between the two and we're trying to help them connect, we approach everything as we want it to be a win-win situation. So we really try and make sure what's the win-win for K-12 and what's the win for workforce to make sure that whatever's being created, they both walk away saying, yes, that was worthwhile and we can get something out of it.

We even do that with higher ed. We had a recent opportunity with that and it just blew my mind because you would think education and education should understand each other, but we were trying to help set up a dual enrollment program. Those students in the high school were going to go to this college to take classes and trying to get them to understand that your schedules don't match and that the prerequisites you're asking for for a high school kid, there is no equivalent. Like, how do you build that out? And it was just eye-opening that

They never really thought about what the other world looked like. When it comes to employers, we do a lot of taking kids into workplaces to do tours and visits, but we always

make sure we talk to the employer for the first time around and talk to them about when you have these students come into your workplace, what are you going to show them? How are you going to talk to them? They are not customers because I've sat in some sessions before where they want to tell you, had this match in sales last year. That means nothing to that kid. And vice versa. had a situation a number of years ago when we took kids into a workplace and one of the kids raised their hand and asked, this was a pretty high up in the company, what kind of car do you drive? The employer was really offended by that. And afterwards we said, do you understand why they asked you that? That's because that gives them an idea of how much money somebody in that job makes. And it was like, okay, now that makes more sense. But we do do that, yeah. Try and have those conversations on both ends to make sure that when they're talking, particularly to the kids, that it makes sense.

Ryan Newman (17:47)

Interesting. And, you know, how do you approach this idea that education is for the betterment of someone's mind and is for just a pursuit of knowledge and not for an ends to a mean of just getting a job? I how do you approach that philosophy that some people have about education?

Jackie Foor (18:05)

It's got to be both and. It's not one or the other. We very much want youth to grow up and love education and love learning. Because if they don't, they're not going to do well professionally either because we know they're going to have to continually re-engage with education throughout their lifetime. We also want them to really enjoy education. So we want to foster that love of learning. In many of the communities we work, we work with students who are first generation, who are economically challenged. So we do have to make sure that it is the both and and that we are paying a lot of attention to setting them up to be successful career-wise. Because if they're successful in their careers, it will provide them continued access to be able to engage with education in ways that are just for them fun, for them just to improve their own wellbeing and life.

It can't be one or the other. always has to be both.

Ryan Newman (19:04)

On the flip side, you hear a lot of times from employers saying that, have so many job openings, I just can't find skilled workers. I can't find the people with the right skills. And it feels like sometimes there's obviously truth to that, but then other times, not to say there's

not truth, but maybe it's just a misunderstanding of where to be looking or how do you address that common refrain from employers?

Jackie Foor (19:26)

I always have to kind of laugh to myself when I hear that because when I first started in this 30 some years ago now, I would be in meetings at the county level and I heard those same complaints 30 years ago. It's not about kids today. It's always people who have been working for a while, I think tend to forget when people are new in the workforce. Yeah, they do still have a lot to learn yet and they may not be entirely ready or prepared for it. And employers do have some responsibility for making sure that those young people continue to evolve, continue to grow, and have opportunities to become better employees. That they do need to support them in that learning process. They cannot expect education, whether it's K-12 or post-secondary, to provide them with these perfectly prepared human beings. It just doesn't work that way. And as far as also they don't have the right skills, then they need to be working with education. They need to be working with intermediaries like my own. Let us know, what are you looking for? What are those skills that you think young people need to be better prepared for your workforce? It might also be, you might need to have some skin in the game of either helping to fund some of those trainings, especially if they're very unique to your own situation. It's gonna take all of us working together to make sure that young people are better.

Ryan Newman (20:55)

And shifting gears, thinking about your role as a leader of a nonprofit, I mean, the first question I would have for you in this regard is, what does it take to run a nonprofit and how is running a nonprofit different than running a for-profit business, which there's so many of the guests we have on the podcast.

Jackie Foor (21:10)

In the nonprofit space, you have to be, I think, always learning, you know, especially in education and workforce. We have to be really aware at the state and federal level, what are the policy changes in both those spheres? How are they impacting how we educate kids, how we prepare kids, what opportunities there are? There's now a major focus on pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships. We need to know what that means because there's a lot of people who use those terms pretty loosely.

But there are some very significant differences between registered apprenticeships and what those set people up for and just somebody calling something an apprenticeship. So

you have to be in that policy space. You also have to be in the space of, think probably more than in for-profit, of really working across with lots of partner organizations. I would say we engage with over dozens and dozens of employers, lots of other nonprofits, dozens of schools.

You can't just be in your own organization and view everybody as competition. You have to sort of view them more as how can we work together to do something really good? We used to get that, well, who's your competition? They just do things differently, complimentary to us, but we have to work together. And I don't think in for-profit world that they necessarily look at if somebody's in my space, how do I work with them to do something? The nonprofit world too, we have so many different constituents. I know you have a lot of different customers and you have to always be reacting to their needs and their wants. But our constituents are very different. I mean, if you think about education and workforce, what they need and what they want are two very, very different things, but we have to be responsive to both. It's really bridging a lot of different needs and trying to find services and supports that can help both.

Ryan Newman (22:57)

when you think about resource constraints, almost by definition, nonprofits typically operate in a resource constrained environment with their own limited resources. How do you make resourcefulness a priority and a skill that allows you to be successful in the face of a resource constrained environment?

Jackie Foor (23:16)

I hear for-profits talk about trying to be lean organizations and I have to laugh. I have six program directors and we serve a 10 county region at least plus we have now we even have contracts as far away as Portland, Oregon. So you know it is about really trying to make the resources you have stretch as much as you can. We have an amazing office space and we chose this space because it allows us to do a lot of the trainings we have.

But it's also our annual rent is about the same cost as a single staff person. So I need to figure out how to bring those costs down. So we partner with another nonprofit organization who can use the space when we don't need it so that we can help cover some of those costs.

We had another nonprofit recently hire us because we could do something for them really well rather than them hiring a staff person to do it. So it'd be just easier to contract with us. We also have to be really sensitive to the schools that we work with. Some of our work is

fee for service and we do charge schools and other organizations we do work for fees for some of our work. We know some of them can't always afford it. So we do offer sliding scale for some of the things that we offer. Always about trying to make sure that

We're bringing in enough money to cover our costs, to be able to do things and do things well. We don't want to be so under-resourced that we do things poorly. But it's always about trying to figure out what do we have to do? What do we need to do it? And I'm also extremely fortunate that my predecessors were able to also, you know, we used to have fundraisers and they would scroll away that money. And so we do have a nice little endowment that we're sitting on.

that is really helping us to make ends meet when our fee for service and our foundation money doesn't make it, we can at least draw on that.

Ryan Newman (25:06)

this concept of social entrepreneurship? Do you think it applies to what you do? And if so,

Jackie Foor (25:11)

Absolutely. It's about really looking at the community, and in this case for us, it's workforce and education and what their needs are, and helping to work alongside them to create solutions to solve the problems that they have. absolutely. We really try never to come in and say we have all the answers. It's about being on the ground, boots on the ground, listening, hearing what their issues are.

I think we probably overdo the whole sticky sometimes people think we do because we bring them into these situations. hand notepads and stickies and take them through methods of let's co-create something together and come up with the good ideas. So absolutely, I would say we're social entrepreneurs here. We don't do anything cookie cutter. Every single time we roll out a program, it's about, okay, who is it serving this time? How are they different from the last group that we dealt with? How are their goals and needs a little bit different?

And how do we make sure that we keep adapting what we do to make sure that we're helping them meet what their goals are.

Ryan Newman (26:13)

So when you think about the future of education and workforce development in Pennsylvania and beyond, what do you see as the biggest areas for growth as you look to the future and what are some challenges we need to be looking out for?

Jackie Foor (26:26)

The growth and the challenges are almost one in the same. It's about blurring the lines more and more between education and workforce development. Blurring lines between, say, K-12 education and higher education so that young people can start to see themselves in that workforce space earlier, to have those opportunities to explore, to try things out. And just the fact that we know that because of technology, because of how fast things are changing within the workforce, we know people are going to have to, throughout their careers, come back to education over and over and over again for retraining to learn the next new thing. That I think people are going to see less of a line between graduation and workforce. And it's going to be kind of, how do I continually have an education over a lifetime?

Ryan Newman (27:11)

And when you think about all of the discussion that's going on right now with respect to AI and really the future and impact of AI is truly unknown. But if you think about some prognosticators who take a pretty dire view to future size of the workforce in response to AI adoption, how do you think workforce readiness and more importantly, how is your own experiences living through your experience in Pittsburgh and watching the transformation of steel industry?

Can you share with us some insights and perspectives you have on what steps both society, government, private-public partnership, nonprofits, what steps do we need to be taking now to really try to make sure that we're positioned for what may be upon us?

Jackie Foor (27:53)

We are fortunate being here in Pittsburgh where we have a lot of universities that are at the very forefront of AI and robotics and computer science and all those technologies. And we do work closely with them. They have told us time and again that our approach to making sure that we build those, really focus on building those human skills, those ones that we know that AI is still a long way, if ever, able to do. The real critical thinking, the real problem solving, the communication skills. We've been leaning very heavily into how do we help kids build those uniquely human skills and keep stressing over and over again that that is what they need to be able to do to be able to be successful in that future AI world. We also

work very closely with trade unions and things like instruction and labor and talk to kids about those kinds of careers because I don't see AI coming in and doing welding anytime soon. But we desperately need a lot of those folks. We try and really make young people aware of what those skills are that they need to develop to be able to compete against AI and also help them think about career pathways that will allow them to be in spaces that will be less impacted by AI, if that's what they want.

Ryan Newman (29:23)

How do you think the narrative needs to change or if you think it does need to change around jobs that you just described that are more labor intensive but seem to be somewhat more innocuous to AI? Of course, until robotics comes along and takes over this as well. that feels to be further out than where we are right now in relation to other jobs.

Jackie Foor (29:42)

That has been, for me, an exciting shift I've seen probably just maybe over the past five years. Is we used to see educators and parents especially, no, I don't want my kids to go into those jobs. But as we've helped them learn and have worked with those trade unions, those organizations to raise awareness of the careers, the wages and the trajectories that you can have in those, they've become less objecting to those kinds of careers.

We also talk about the fact that if you pursue any of those careers, particularly if you are going into a registered apprenticeship, you're taking post-secondary education along the way. You are, for many of those occupations, going to finish your apprenticeship with an associate's degree also. None of these pathways are dead end. You can always continue on and get that bachelor's degree, the master's, the PhD.

often work with employers who are willing to take kids right out of high school and do that kind of training because we also know for a lot of the kids that we serve, they can't afford post-secondary education. So they need to know what are these other pathways where they can go and have somebody else pay for it. For us, it's not a either or. It's again a both and. You can do this and still have all of these other doors open to you if you want that.

Ryan Newman (31:08)

Jackie, it's really clear you've had such an impact on the communities with which you've served and you've been such a dedicated steward for so long. What advice do you have for

a student that may be thinking about wanting to start a nonprofit one day or run a nonprofit organization?

Jackie Foor (31:24)

We've had some interns here before who have been interested in nonprofit work and I always tell them, make sure somebody helps you learn how to write a grant because that is the key to helping you not only get a job, but it really does help you. I think back to other organizations where I have worked and I have been the grant writer. It allows you to have your fingers in everything that organization does. You understand every program that they do. You understand how they financially operate. You even learn a little HR along the way. It is the best place to be in a nonprofit organization to learn everything you need to know to then lead your own organization.

Ryan Newman (32:05)

We're now going to enter our rapid fire segment of the show, What will happen is I'll ask you a few questions if you could tell me the first thing that comes to mind in the sentence. So we'll start now. What is your favorite thing about Penn State?

Jackie Foor (32:17)

My favorite thing about Penn State are all of the people and the friendships that I have made over the years, both as an undergrad there and then also serving on the parent council and now alumni council.

Ryan Newman (32:28)

What is your best advice you've ever received?

Jackie Foor (32:30)

Best advice I have ever received is, I always think back to my father who told me to try and do the thing that you think is hardest first. Because then if you have to pivot, it's always easier to pivot if you've tried the hard path first.

Ryan Newman (32:46)

What was your favorite subject in school?

Jackie Foor (32:48)

My favorite subject in school was science, particularly chemistry. My superpower as a leader, I think I'm a good listener and I think I'm empathetic. I really try to put myself in other people's shoes and try and figure out how they're experiencing either my leadership or programming anything to make sure that I'm meeting their needs.

Ryan Newman (32:52)

What's your superpower as a leader?

What's one myth about running a nonprofit that you think needs to be debunked?

Jackie Foor (33:16)

A myth about running a nonprofit that needs to be debunked is that it's necessarily always low paying. You can have a nice, comfortable lifestyle working for a nonprofit.

Ryan Newman (33:28)

What's your favorite way to unwind after a long day?

Jackie Foor (33:30)

My favorite way to unwind after a long day, I love to go hiking. Put me out in the woods, that's great. Or put me in a kitchen so I can cook.

Ryan Newman (33:37)

What does disruption mean to you?

Jackie Foor (33:40)

Disruption to me means, I think anymore, more opportunity. Disruption means that there's now new problems that need to be solved. And as a nonprofit and kind of as that social entrepreneur, it's about how do we work with our community to solve whatever this disruption is.

Ryan Newman (33:57)

Thank you, Jackie, for taking the time today to share your entrepreneurial journey with me. Now I'd to hand things over to a recent Penn State student, Edward Amoa. Edward recently earned his doctorate in ecology with a dual title in international agriculture and development from Penn State and is currently a post-doctoral researcher and ICDS rising

research fellow. He is president of Yansapo Labs, whose mission is to expand equitable access to targeting

teaching and personalized learning through AI enabled teaching and learning systems. He is also founder and CEO of Pixel Design Labs, whose mission is to build scalable AI tools that automate monitoring and power decision support for precision agriculture, conservation, and scientific research. Edward has participated in the Invent Penn State NSF I-Core short course program, won the Nittany AI Challenge,

and participated in the Humanitarian Engineering and Social Entrepreneurship Program in the College of Engineering at Penn State. Edward, I'll now hand the interview over to you.

Edward Amoah (35:03)

Thank you, Ryan. Again, I'm very grateful for the opportunity to meet you, Jackie. I'm currently an African fellow at the World Bank. And as I said earlier, my work is currently focused on exactly what you were doing. And so the intersection between education and workforce is a problem globally, not just in Western PA and many, many areas, fortunately, all unfortunately, do not have the resources that you presently offer to schools and to employers.

I was wondering like, personally, the way that I see AI being used anywhere to disrupt is that, you know, people usually think AI will automate or replace people. But I like to think of AI as working together with human intelligence, human in the loop, and already working with what human beings have found to be a good solution. And so I guess what I want to get at is like, what have you found to be the secret sauce of your organization that makes it so successful at connecting education to the work.

Jackie Foor (36:07)

So I'm not sure we've found entirely the secret sauce yet, but so far, it really is about hearing from both sides and what they need and making sure that what the programs and services and supports that we develop and the partnerships that we develop are always about how we can be in service of both, knowing that we need to bring education and students together with workforce.

but each is coming at this needing something different and having different goals, there's still a way to help both. So it's a matter of spending the time to understand what each need, not assuming you have all of the answers and being okay and being comfortable with

going in a different direction if you learn something along the way that didn't exactly fit the frame that you already had.

Edward Amoah (37:02)

That's a very wonderful answer. So when it comes to building relationships and you've spoken about how important relationships are to the success of what you do. How important is building relationships with employers to the mission that you bring? And I ask this because currently with the work that I'm working on, we have solutions that are targeting teachers, that targeting students to help them understand career options in their area. But we haven't thus far paid attention to.

employers in those regions. So I kind of want to hear your perspective on that.

Jackie Foor (37:34)

We have found that it's until you build trust, and that's over time with those relationships, you're not going to get very far with anybody, including employers. You really have to demonstrate to them that you're going to do what you say, that you have follow through, that you are actually going to listen to them. And it takes a long time sometimes to build that kind of trust. Here in my organization at the consortium, that's really important to us.

And it's something that is always top of mind that we want to make sure that we're being authentic, that we are delivering what we say we were going to deliver, that we follow up and have very clear communication with our employer partners. We know that they are extremely busy and that they only have a small window of time really to interact with us. So we want to make the most of it. think focusing on always building and earning their trust has been really crucial.

Edward Amoah (38:34)

How do you build these relationships and how can you scale it?

Jackie Foor (38:38)

We build relationships multiple ways, one-on-one meetings. We also have a lot of opportunities where we create large group convenings where we can connect them also to other employers, other schools. We really focus on trying to build those opportunities to help them build those networking opportunities as well, which they value. And they come away, at least from what they tell us, leaving like...

I really came there and there was something good that I could take away from it. wasn't just I came and I heard the same old story or the same old information all the time. We always are looking at how can we make sure that there's some opportunity in it for them. Going back to that, we don't do something cookie cutter. We want to know how we can create opportunities for them to say, connect to schools or connect to other employers in ways that make sense for them. Not that

necessarily make sense for us. In my region, we have urban, suburban, rural, and we are always very aware of if you're a business and you're out in some of our more rural areas, how you interact and work with your workforce could look very different than if you're in an urban area. And we have to make sure that we're responsive to those kinds of things. Just being aware of who they are and how we can be helpful.

Edward Amoah (39:58)

I really like your answer and I like the emphasis on bringing value to both parties or all parties or all stakeholders involved, including the employees themselves and finding ways to not just connect them with schools, but also connect them with other employers or other people in the community in a way that brings value to them. That's, that's, that's definitely something that I'm going to meditate upon today.

Thank you for sharing that. Sure. I wouldn't end this interview without asking the question about how you think AI could be used in this space. You talked about how, you know, sometimes employers are looking for, think that their skills that students don't have the skills that they need. How could AI help students get those skills or how could AI help students understand opportunities in their region? How do you think that space is moving?

Jackie Foor (40:50)

moving slowly. We are fortunate again in southwestern Pennsylvania that there have particularly from the foundation level been dollars put in to help educators become more aware of AI tools, better users of AI tools so that they can help their students also apply those tools. I still think we're in a space where we have to help young people figure out how to be better, more discerning users of AI. How to be better at

asking questions of AI so that they can get the information they need. I think from the employer side of it, we need them to help us in education better understand how they're using AI, how their expectations for how people should be able to apply AI. In the workforce, AI is more than just large language models. It's more than just being able to use chat GPT.

But in education, we don't know enough about that yet. So we still need employers to help us better understand how they're applying it and how they expect their new hires to come in and be able to use it. So I think we still on the education side have a lot.

Edward Amoah (42:06)

I like your perspective on how AI is disrupting industry and how they are obviously changing and incorporating AI in different ways and education have to catch up. You've talked about opportunities of AI, but what are some of the challenges that you foresee because of AI in this sort of education and workforce connection?

Jackie Foor (42:28)

Well, I mean, I think almost everybody has heard in education, the biggest challenge is how do we make sure that students aren't just using it to cheat? I was driving into work today and was listening to NPR and there was whole other story on, yes, lots of kids are using AI and lots of people think they're using it to cheat. And some are, not all. We need to help youth better understand how to use it as a learning tool to help grow their own.

knowledge and support their own skill sets rather than just as a means to an end, which I think too often, and it's just because they don't know any better. Right now, it's a means to an end. It helps me get this assignment done.

Edward Amoah (43:13)

I've been in this AI space. I got my undergrad in computer engineering and I actually have a nonprofit, Nyan Spot Labs. And our mission is to bring AI to education, to target that and personalize learning and also to the workforce. And one of the things that I always keep in my mind is that you can think of AI as a tool for automation, or you can think of AI as a tool of augmentation. And I like to think that...

I'd rather have AI augment my intelligence, I'd totally replace my intelligence. And AI can really help you do things that you couldn't have done before. And I think people as we are still learning these things. so it's interesting how the world is moving so quickly.

Jackie Foor (44:00)

You said augment because that's exactly where we should be headed. It shouldn't be one or the other. It should be humans and AI, like with AI augmenting the humans. Yeah.

Edward Amoah (44:12)

So I guess, how are you seeing the industry or the workforce in your area incorporating AI that you know of? Or is it still also very slow?

Jackie Foor (44:23)

It's uneven, I would say. Big corporations that have lots of resources, yes, they are using AI, they're bringing it into their workforce. But we still work with a lot of small mom and pop employers, small businesses, and they don't have the skills to be able to use AI. Not all of them, but many of them still don't have the...

the skill set or understanding to be able to know how to apply AI to what they do to help them do that better. I'm not sure how that's going to be overcome anytime soon, but it also really drives that point that I was making earlier that people need to understand education's got to be part of your life throughout your career. And AI is a really good example of that disruptor.

Edward Amoah (45:11)

This is my last question. Given the disruption that is happening in the industry or the need for, you know, incorporation of AI or technology into industry and other fields, how are you positioned or how are you adjusting your programs for teachers or educators to rethink education?

Jackie Foor (45:34)

funny, I just got back from a conference that was on this, not necessarily just focused on AI, but really thinking about how we do need to reinvent particularly K-12 education. That we need to start giving youth more what we call in education speak, work-based learning opportunities, to really start to give them opportunities to see how the workforce applies the skills that they're learning in the classroom. So that way classroom learning becomes more relevant so that they can see how those basic science and math and English courses as well as anything they might learn in AI is applied in the real world. Because I think for young people today, if they don't see something being relevant, then they don't see a point in why they need to learn it. It's not like a long time ago where somebody just says, you have to learn this and people just, okay, yeah, you told me I have to learn it. Now you have to show them why they have to learn something.

So we do have to be able to give them more of those hands-on experiences and see how different knowledge and different technologies are being applied in the

Edward Amoah (46:42)

Thank you so much for your time. For me, with AI, when we're AI to do anything, I like to focus on the purpose of what I'm trying to do. Am I trying to build product or am I trying to help my customer understand something better? And it's like, can AI help me achieve the purpose? And you can't do that unless you've spent the time to learn how to problem solve things, how to debug things, how to think critically as an engineer.

And if I didn't spend the time learning at Penn State as an engineer, it will be really hard for you to do that. So I think we need to incorporate AI into education, but, and also understand that it's going to be a part of the workforce and we need to learn how to work with it, learn with it, and also how to use it in the industry. I hope to learn more from you and thank you so much.

Jackie Foor (47:30)

Thank you. I would love to learn more from you too. I think I have a lot to learn. Thank you.

Ryan Newman (47:35)

That was Jackie Foor, Executive Director of the Consortium for Public Education. This episode was produced and edited by our executive producer, Katie DeFiore. If you're listening on Apple Podcasts and enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving us a rating and review. It helps more people discover the show. We'd also love for you to share this episode with one person who might be inspired by Jackie's story. Make sure to follow Dare to Disrupt on your favorite podcast app so you never miss an episode. Thanks for listening.