

39 Innovations in Career Navigation and Workforce Ecosystem Impact



Discover how WorkBay®, a technology firm founded by CEO Mary Hayes and COO Alice Hayes, is making a difference in career navigation both regionally and nationally. WorkBay integrates the skills-first approach of the workforce ecosystem, and their innovations in this area are revolutionizing career exploration and navigation. During a recent *Work Ready Communities Live* event, Mary and Alice shared insights about the latest pilots with ACT® and how WorkBay is integrating WorkKeys benchmarks into user-friendly platforms in regions and targeted initiatives across the U.S. WorkBay successfully tackled the technological challenges of serving returning citizens with pre-release activities. By combining high-tech solutions with a personal touch, WorkBay provides career navigation that truly matters.

Voices of Excellence on Episode 39



Mary Hayes, CEO/Founder
[WorkBay](#)
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Alice Hayes, COO/Co-Founder
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Transcript of Episode 39

Jingle Open with Music: [Let's Get Ready for Work](#)

Mary Hayes: Just like WorkKeys, we are trying to pay attention to the goal and use technology to get to the goal and whatever needs to get done. Jasen, we liked to say whatever the question is, the answer is yes. We'll figure it out.

Jasen Jones: Career Navigation technology keeps getting better with time. Discover how WorkBay is making a difference regionally and nationwide as Mary and Alice from WorkBay join us on Episode 39.

Podcast Open: Ready for Work is a podcast from ACT spotlighting excellence and innovation throughout the workforce ecosystem. Jasen Jones hosts this journey with trends and ideas to help your region's workforce reach its highest potential. Now, let's get Ready for Work!

Jasen: We're pleased to have WorkBay CEO and founder Mary Hayes, along with COO and co-founder Alice Hayes joining us on Episode 39 of Ready for Work. WorkBay is a technology firm that truly integrates the skills-first approach of the workforce ecosystem. Alice and Mary, welcome to Ready for Work.

Alice Hayes: Thank you.

Mary: I've had the delight of working with the ACT WorkKeys team and am a rabid fan, exactly as the employers all say. We do work a great deal with those who are self-declaring their skills, knowledge, interest, education, experience, and goals. We love WorkKeys for its ability to really precisely meet the needs of the folks we work with.

Jasen: WorkBay has strong experience with employers and identifying skills. Tell us more, Mary.

Mary: We started out, we built the training programs for about 30 Fortune 500 companies worldwide. McDonald's®, Disney®, Home Depot®, Four Seasons®, Johnson and Johnson, etcetera. And in that, what we would do is corporations would hire our company. We would go in and put on the uniform, job shadowed, map the skills. Identify what do we need to teach. How can we practice it? How can we assess it for these jobs in these organizations? We did this for many, many occupations. And then once we had identified the competencies, we would build training programs and run them on our learning management, competency management system so that employees could have speed to safety, speed to performance and speed to engagement.

Jasen: With solid success for employers, how did WorkBay evolve to connect with learners and seekers?

Mary: We then built WorkBay by taking our tools, our learn management system, job coaching, applicant tracking competence management system, because we realized that on the other side of the doorway, of these large corporations, that we're dealing with massive turnover.

On the community side of the doorway, there were people who, just like the HR Director for a Wal-Mart® needed a way to disseminate learning, publish learning, assess skills, and do matching into careers; just like the Department of Defense does with their new recruits; just like every corporation. Communities have folks who need to do that same thing. We started providing

workday as a system of support to the people who were connecting up people without jobs and jobs without people.

Jasen: Mary, what are some of WorkBay's capabilities our listeners would find helpful?

Mary: There's a backend dashboard that lets people see the data of what young people are looking at from education to employment, how adult job seekers are getting the education that they need. The workforce boards, educators, could see the placement data, longitude, for those who had graduated. And employers could see who has what skills. It's kind of like Netflix® and Indeed® came together and created a unified platform. So, when you see a job, you can see videos, training, and assessments to help get you ready for that job.

We are deployed all over the place. Wherever people are in transitions, students finding their career plan, unemployed people finding their job, military veterans looking for their civilian employment, immigration to American workforce. We're funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement for new Americans, and all of the various labor market non-participation projects.

Jasen: I understand the returning citizen ecosystem is important to WorkBay as well.

Mary: Incarceration to employment is a core passion for us, not only the 600,000 to 750,000 people who are returning to communities after incarceration, but also the ten million Americans who are moving through our county jail systems every year. WorkBay is on their platform, free to them for them to use, helping to get them work ready.

Jasen: Mary, what's been your observation in the field on the importance of career navigation and why should the ecosystem put a higher priority on navigation resources?

Mary: We're very motivated with the goal of having a million Americans who are not employed to become employed, and to track and promote that for a ten-year period, because there is a \$333 billion direct impact to the economy. Bureau of Labor Statistic tells us about 95 million Americans do not participate in the labor market. Of that, 30 million say they want a job. 30 million. So, if we could find a way to improve the results for 1 million adults, we'd have a \$333 billion impact.

This is a thing that we are doing to try to do, better matching and understanding of what are those barriers, and how can we improve access to opportunity for people. So, we're trying to use machine learning and have been using machine learning, or AI, for about eight years, always working to get it better, to bring in a person, identify their skills, knowledge, interest, education, experience and goals, identify learning opportunities, match the learning opportunities to the employer requirements, and put all of that together.

Jasen: With the successful integration of WorkKeys benchmarks into WorkBay, how has the process improved for individuals and employers?

Mary: When someone is doing their WorkKeys, that can become a part of the algorithm that is helping us to identify and match people to jobs, jobs to people, and also to provide supports to workforce agents, educators, economic development agents, the mayor's office, about who has what skills, and who needs to hire for what skills. The interactivity where we work to elicit their self-declaration of their skills, knowledge, interest, acceptance, and then, that can map into their WorkKeys true assessment of what they can demonstrate are their skills, and knowledge, and experience. Without WorkKeys, we are stuck with self-declaration. With WorkKeys, declaration of skills is grounded in an assessment that everyone agrees on, everyone agrees is meaningful.

Jasen: Before we turn to Alice for more on the platform, what is the reach of WorkBay for mobile users?

Mary: Our platform is a mobile app as well as a browser side. And like I said, as a mobile app, it's on all the smartphones, but it's also used on the tablets in the 19 different states, and in the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and also in the community opportunities, jail operations.

Jasen: Thanks, Mary. Alice, would you walk us through the user experience?

Alice: Our implementations are really deployed for geographic or needs based communities with different champions really running them. When a student, or a job seeker, or an educator in that community hears about a program of which we are, the technology infrastructure, behind what they do is they go to that program's website. And so, we have all different things like Elevate TN, which is across the state of Tennessee. Well, we also have Elevate Futures, which is in the Minneapolis region, customized to the champions in that community. And so, if I am an individual job seeker or student, I come in, I register, and then the first thing that I do is I go through what we call the little profile builder. It's very much natural language. Sarah has signed up and she goes through this sort of chat interaction saying, you know. Hello, Sarah, welcome to Talent Hub. Answer a few questions about yourself to get matched to careers and learning on the job. Based on what I've told the system, I am getting suggested different career cards, which is where we are integrated to ACT. Then I am also getting suggested courses, so, courses that I might be interested in based on my career pathway. Every individual user has their own customized kind of home page experience. Just like if you go to Netflix® and you like romantic comedies, you're going to see romantic comedies. If you like nursing, you're going to see nursing suggestions on our systems, and every user has customized experience.

Mary: So Alice is using the term like. But, what she means is, that the affinity of that user, that the profile tagging that has come in through their WorkKeys score, through their self-declared skills, knowledge, interest, education, experience. If they are a college student or if they are high school student, their administrator may have added badges to their profile or their learner employability record, or want to call it. If they are someone who is experienced incarceration, they may be doing a face-to-face construction practice, or furniture upholstery, that can be added by the administrator in the back end. So, all of those things go together to allow the machine algorithms to make a recommendation. But I just want to do a shout out here, just to make sure we 100% that do not think that any machine is ever better than a human being. And if we can sit knee-to-knee with somebody and look at them and talk to them and engage them, we know that that is absolutely never going to be matched by anything an algorithm could do. The thing is, though, that there's an average of 250 applications for every digitally posted job, and only five people on average get an invitation to an interview. That stat, that 245 people get shoved to the side from the applicant tracking system of job postings, that just came out a couple of weeks ago from an Accenture, Harvard study. And so, what we're trying to do is get into the 245 that got shoved to the side. And instead of using machine algorithms to filter them out, use machine algorithms to filter them in.

Alice: Yes. Absolutely.

Jasen: That is a very helpful perspective, thank you both. There is so much more to WorkBay than we cover in one podcast episode, but I would like to hear more on the training resources available to WorkBay users.

Alice: We have a full learning library of which we have about 270 locally hosted courses. That is content that we have built with partners over the years. We also integrate to any different type of online content that is available to the clients that we're working with. All of these courses will give the user a badge on their resumé upon completion. We are very heavily video based. So, you can see a full video library of all different types of things. So, things covering different topics. When we have live events, they get pre-recorded and posted on the site. This is really engaging and kind of your YouTube® for work with content that's continuously changing.

Jasen: We learned recently some exciting news for WorkBay in the nationwide Future Finders challenge. Tell us more, Mary.

Mary: The US Department of Education identified five companies as semifinalists in a \$500,000 competition called Feature Finders. And we are so pleased to be one of those five companies that

will be demonstrating this in New York in September. And we are also participating in the U.S. Chamber Foundation as twelve companies that are working on using artificial intelligence to better take in unstructured data, someone's personal narrative, and turn it into a structured learner employability record. And in that, Jasen has advised us, and we are really keen, to continue working with ACT WorkKeys to do better and better, giving people those badges, those skills, those understandings that are going to help them navigate their community's economy.

Jasen: This approach of unbundling workforce solutions with a heavy focus on user experience really makes a difference in career navigation.

Mary: Yeah, just like WorkKeys, right?

Jasen: Right on.

Mary: Just like WorkKeys, we are trying to pay attention to the goal and use technology to get to the goal and whatever needs to get done. Jason, we like to say, whatever the question is, the answer is yes. We'll figure it out.

Jasen: Oh, absolutely. For our listeners now really catching the vision for regional career navigation, what should they know financially about launching a regional platform of this high caliber?

Mary: The system of support is usually funded by a foundation, or like a Chamber of Commerce foundation or regional development foundation, or at the state level by a workforce director. That technology usually gets funded somewhere else so that people on the ground have free access to it. So, like, Office of Refugee Resettlement funds it so that any refugee resettlement organization across the country can use it.

We personally fund the national civilian side for those who are returning citizens from incarceration so that they can continue their record from whatever they are doing while experiencing incarceration, they can pick it back up. On the civilian side, we have different relationships with different corrections institutions so that when they have left one place, they can go to the library or download an app to their mobile phone and pick back up and continue.

Jasen: I would like to circle back around to the returning citizens ecosystem, Mary. A challenge for many regions is the technology firewalls that prevent typical online solutions from reaching those on the inside that could really make the difference. How did this work in corrections begin for WorkBay? And how does WorkBay defeat these access challenges for pre-release activities?

Mary: Because we are really focused on that goal of those who are underemployed, or are not participating in the labor market. We actually started working in corrections around 2015, 2016. We were part of the Barbara Bush Foundation and Dollar General® X Prize for Adult Literacy and started volunteering inside Shelby (County) Corrections. I was living in Memphis at the time and were surprised to find out that there were 18 hundred people in Shelby Corrections. On that, there were over 200 who had actually served their time, but had been sentenced to time, plus job readiness training. The job readiness training was not able to be delivered. And so that was creating a barrier to release. So, they also didn't have Internet access at that time.

So, we took our entire platform and rebuilt it so could work inside a backpack. I was just going in with a backpack and tablets running that program. That was noticed by the US Department of Labor, luckily, and we then were introduced to a number of other folks. And so now, when there are correctional tablet or I.T providers in the prisons, they have WorkBay on there and that's paid for in different ways, but essentially it's always free for the actual incarcerated person. They can use geolocation of where they are incarcerated, or the geolocation of where they plan to return, meaning they plan to return to, and they can see what jobs are available.

It's an interactive Internet model. So, if they're using the backpack, the backpack goes into the classroom and it comes back out to the warden or instructors' office, then it can phone home. It uploads all the explorers, downloads all the jobs, and is refreshed to go back into the non-Internet environment again. Other correctional technology systems have a firewalled special situation for doing that kind of internet connection. WorkKeys in corrections is all different ways. And so, in some cases, the person, or the administrator has to put in their WorkKeys ID number.

Jasen: Right.

Mary: In other cases, if we are given a list, we can import it.

Jasen: Mary, what advice would you give employers on this approach and why it works ?

Mary: You know, a key part of making that algorithm work is that the employers have identified the WorkKeys skills that aligned to the job occupation. Well, some of those, especially if we go regionally, we can add the context and the meaningfulness of that.

So, in Idaho, I'm going in, just like I did at Wal-Mart® and mapping those skills and competencies for the jobs they do in the correctional industries deployments. So that then their WorkKeys will align to something that's even more specific that has been tested against what is the real application of these skills on this job.

We did another thing in Memphis where an employer that would not hire was looking for 700 people, but they would not hire anybody who had a background. But by having a conversation with the employer, by saying, well, is that exactly as you said there, there are some folks that maybe deserve a second chance. And so, by creating a portfolio for the worker that identified their skills, experience, interest, it jumped over that background check, and they hired for competency and motivation, instead of just refusing for background.

One more. In Maury County, Tennessee, they have a really great program there. And I know of someone who got a \$70,000 a year job, from incarceration, through day release to laser cutting, to a \$70,000 a year job.

Jasen: Mary, do you have any parting thoughts on overcoming technology challenges in career navigation?

Mary: Remember the thing I said before? We're technology people. The answer is always yes. Yes, it is possible. And so, we just would need to have a follow up meeting to talk about it a little bit more. And then there are ways to get that done. Thank you.

Alice: Thank you.

Jasen: Mary and Alice, thank you both for being a part of episode 39 and sharing with us a powerful vision for career navigation that matters.

Our show notes include links and contacts for Mary and Alice with WorkBay. The 2023 ACT Workforce Summit in Nashville this October includes a plenary session with Mary, joining forces with Joe T Wood of Southwest Tennessee's Career Readiness Network and Joy Coates with the Markle Foundation. Check out the agenda and learn more online at act.org/workforcesummit.

Closing with Jingle: Ready for Work is a service from your friends at ACT, a mission-driven non-profit dedicated to helping people achieve education and workplace success. Discover more at act.org/readyforworkpodcast. Now, let's get to work!