

43 High Tech Meets High Touch to Engage Working Learners



Change management enables working learners to acquire skills and adopt behaviors that maximize workforce and learning outcomes. On episode 43 of Ready for Work, guest Robert Feeney shares his personal journey that led him to develop Ringorang. Driven by overcoming severe mental health challenges in his family, Robert emphasizes the importance of behavior change in education and career development. The solution deploys drip advertising techniques to enhance training outcomes, change management, and participant engagement. Schools and workforce stakeholders send out information and actions to participants and collect actionable data on their responses. The conversation introduces the Future Ready program and explores intersections of work-based learning with participant engagement technology as well.

Voices of Excellence on Episode 43



Robert Feeney, Chief Vision Officer
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Transcript of Episode 43

Jingle Open with Music: Let's Get Ready for Work

Robert Feeney: The techniques of drip familiarity that's developed in advertising, that's the most sophisticated model ever created to date on getting people to change behaviors and take on new behaviors.

Jasen Jones: Robert Feeney of Ringorang joins us to explore innovations for change management, coming up on episode 43 of Ready for Work, High Tech Meets High Touch to Engage Working Learners.

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 thrilled to catch up with Robert Feeny, one of FRED Talks plenary presenters at the 2022 ACT Workforce Summit, for a follow up on Ringorang, a technology solution that uses drip advertising to improve training outcomes, change management, and workforce development engagement. Robert shares his personal journey, which led him to develop this approach, highlighting the importance of behavior change in education and career development.

Welcome to Ready for Work, Robert. Please set the stage for us on Ringorang and what brought you to this point in your journey.

Robert: sure. And happy to. So Ringorang, it's a play on the word boomerang. It's our way in a software and an app based way of enabling schools and workforce stakeholders to engage their participants by the Drip. So it's like you're sending out a boomerang, one piece of action or one piece of information or an action you want someone to take. And then it comes back with data on what they know or don't know about it and what they're doing about it. And that serves as a kind of loop over and over again. And what brought me to this was a long story that we could possibly unpack pieces of, and that is, I actually started out on a very severe mental health journey. And it wasn't my own. It was my older brothers and my younger brother. Both of them died by suicide and they both had very severe bipolar conditions which launched me into my adult years looking for the key to behavior change. Like how do you take on a behavior that makes your life work regardless of your wiring, right, or your circumstances? And Long story took me around to a really circuitous route that took me through Hollywood, took me through advertising and marketing, and then eventually to Ringorang where we found that by using the advertising model, the techniques of drip familiarity that's developed in advertising and then eventually try and buy that, that's the most sophisticated model ever created to date on getting people to change behaviors and take on new behaviors. Ringorang was born.

Jasen: Recalling your story from the FRED talks, Robert, it's truly impactful, and it resonates with our shared passion for improving decision-making processes. Whether it's navigating career paths, acquiring credentials, or engaging in various training and educational programs, our mission centers on enhancing individual journeys. Take us a quick flyover of the technology.

Robert: Yeah, the ring, a ring boomerang kind of format of engaging people by the drip for just one minute at a time and then making it fun. So, it's engaging because it's got some gamification

elements to it and it's got badges you're chasing and there's some social competition. All of those elements have people come back to those one minute at a time engagements that are nestled into their day without. And this is really the key, without taking their time away from their day. And we found that that's so important because, I mean, how many how much good content is created out there? Brilliant content to try to help a young person launch themselves into a career and how little of it actually gets to make a difference in the person's life because you can't get them back to it enough times for them to make it real in their life. That's why we built that format.

Jasen: I'm intrigued by your achievements in the system and your work with Goodwill and workforce development in central Kansas. Sharing these experiences could offer valuable insights to our listeners.

Robert: We when we first developed Ringorang, it was taking the advertising techniques and then we, we actually were literally working with advertisers way back when and we actually prototyped this back in 2007. So that's how far back the app goes. But then moving from there into corporate training and we found that, wow, we could really make an impact with employees on performance. How do they actually drive performance in the workplace? And it took us till I moved to Central Kansas when I came out here to Wichita from Silicon Valley, that I saw an opportunity that led to working with Goodwill and with schools now in multiple states. That is what had me come to the Workforce summit and start sharing the experiment that we were developing because that what had worked so well up to that point, which was just two years ago, was developing performance in human beings around the world in various workplace settings. Wherever they were, we could help develop performance, right? But then I come to Wichita. Wichita, Kansas is known for advanced manufacturing, and also, as I found, was also known for having a talent problem. Now, this isn't unique to Wichita. It was just it was very pronounced the way I saw it happening here on talent is that we've all come to know is, you know, you get 10 million jobs, you got 6 million people looking for jobs. The math doesn't add up. And then they're not they're not lined up well with each other either. And that's the crisis. We've got to get young people or people who are not so young and they're reskilling either way. We've got to get them aligned with what industry needs. And I saw something for Ringorang. I said, oh, my gosh, this is what we've been doing for years. We've been helping get people skilled and skilled in their particular job functions. What if we could bring this to someone who's not yet in their career and actually help them? Well, what that opened up for me was what we call employability skills, right?

Jasen: Right

Robert: Employability skills. Sometimes they're called transferable or transportable skills. And then when that started getting unpacked for me, which I particularly appreciated because they're kind of also known as soft skills, sometimes a lot of people don't like that term. It's because, you know, hey, it's about the things that are more like life skills as opposed to how do I turn a wrench or how do I use a rule. It's how do I function and communicate and solve problems and keep my work-life balance together and deal with a life crisis. Those are things that are not taught in academics. So I thought, how do we bring that to a young person who's in school and is thinking about how am I going to be effective in the workplace? Well, employability skills keeps coming up. All the industry leaders are saying, and we need them to know how to communicate, know how important it is to show up on time. Wow. Okay. We thought we were all supposed to be taught that, you know, before we were five years old. But now it turns out we need to learn this as adults or young adults. So when I pointed our Ringorang solution to that problem, we started seeing some amazing dividends from it that I did not expect. And when I came to the summit last time, it was to say, Here's some really early indicators we have that this could be transformative in filling the gap of the talents crisis. And it was working with WSU Tech over here, which is Wichita State University's affiliated two-year college. And we saw that you could have a single workforce coordinator who's trying to deal with 120 students who are also employees in the major manufacturing companies out here. And that one workforce coordinator, 120 people he's trying to coach, he'd try to make it like an appointment with two people a day. And it taken four months to get through all of them, right?

Jasen: Sounds very challenging

Robert: Indeed, with Ringorang, he was able to look at the data on this drip engagement, on what people knew and didn't know and what they needed to be effective and could then zero in optimize focus what he was going to try to remediate. And that would be more like a subset of 24 kids as opposed to 120. Right? That made it more efficient for them and then cost effective for WSU tech. And then since the workforce summit, up till today, what we've done now is gone out to high schools that have CTE trainings, career focused education that they really are focused on. How do you get a student into their careers powerfully, something outside of academics, right? And that's where we're really showing that it makes a huge difference in developing a value creating employee while optimizing the process for the coaches and counselors.

Jasen: A big takeaway here is the approach doesn't focus solely on creating the perfect program, but rather personalization at scale.

Robert: Yeah it's giving you an opportunity to see what to focus on. That's what's key. And it's both on both sides of the equation from the educator side and also on the learner side. On the learner's side, it's giving them one thing to think about or do in that moment. So what will happen is the student, let's say, will go into homeroom, right? And then they install the app and they're given an invite code and then they just go about their day and at some point they get an alert and it says, Hey, there's a timed question sequence here. And if they can take it right, then it's cool. Otherwise they can take it sometime before the end of the week. But when they do live, which happens like about 20 to 25% of the time, they're able to be on a ticking clock with anyone else in their school or in their district. And they answer a question. They get an insight that says, here's one thing, just one thing to think about or do. Try this in your next conversation. Try speaking to your supervisor about this question you have about your path, let's say, or about your pay. Try whenever you find yourself in a conflict doing this to de-escalate it, it's going to be a better way for you to get your way or to accomplish something. So these are the one things that we ask someone to focus on bit by bit, which we find cognitively is significantly more effective and more like the way we go about our day, where we pick up things one thing at a time than it is to say, Here's a course that we want you to spend an hour watching a video or something and you're able to take away one, two or three things and do not the four things that showed up in the video, right?

Jasen: Absolutely, that's a fantastic point, and you're right on track with where I was headed next. What's particularly intriguing is the frequency of informal learning at those intersections, as opposed to what's strictly scripted or programmed. I like to think of it as a balance between the organized and the organic, with the latter being where the real-time personalized experience truly unfolds. Robert, I'm eager to hear more about your work on the ground in Louisiana that originated from last year's Workforce Summit.

Robert: Fantastic. Thanks for asking about that. Yeah, you mentioned Louisiana and I have a particular love for the folks at West Baton Rouge schools because Julie and Jill, they're the CTE directors. They really leaned in to help us shape a program that would be most effective for juniors and seniors in high school. And so I'll use their program. We're doing there as an example. The state put forth a grant called the Reimagine Schools. Grant and West Baton Rouge were one of the recipients of that grant. So it was inside that program where they're completely overhauling their career academy that they brought in, retiring and helped us develop a program we call Future Ready. And this program has it was working so quickly at the end of last year's school year. You know, that that finished up just before this summer and that we were just going to use that as a little bit of a mini pilot and then try out the serious stuff at the beginning of this

school year. Well, it was going so well and we got so much content developed quickly. We thought, Well, let's go out and have some other schools pilot it with us and we'll make something of a test design across multiple states. So we did. We had folks here at USD 259, which is Wichita Public Schools and eight different high schools, and then went to Arkansas and one of their co-ops brought in six high schools. And had we had them all doing the same thing and we tested it against each other to see three different things, to see what they were working at, working or not working. One of them is enrollment. Like what does it take to get people enrolled? The other was how often they engaged and then the other is learning, retention or recall, as we call it. So what we learned was across all three of these states. And so these are schools that are suburban, urban and rural. There was significant and similarity across all three in terms of learning retention. So I'll start there. Learning retention we found to be at about 75% across the board. And we actually look for first month or so of learning retention to get somewhere between 65 and 85%. So it landed square in the middle. It was pretty cool and it was almost identical across the three states. And this is against like Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve research that shows you're going to have about 25% learning retention if you're not doing repetition over the course of a week, like you've lost that much, you lose 75% in a week from after a lesson, right? So we were able to show retention across a month of 75. Great. That was very uniform. Next, we were looking at the engagement levels. Get this, students were coming back to the app between 10 to 20 times a month on their own, 10 to 20 times. So in, and that's it. That's on average. So you had like the most engaged people were coming back over 30 times to this app to get more information and they were making special requests on average on a weekly basis for more information about certain subjects that they kept coming back to, like mentorship, like how do I what are the best job acquisition skills? Like, how do I set up my resume? They were actually going for the information and we saw that also very consistent across the three states with Arkansas showing a little bit more of a bump. They were closer to 20 than they were to the ten. And you know what we found out that was because they had the best prizes.

Jasen: That makes sense.

Robert: The students really responded to the incentives. And what theirs were was not necessarily what you think. What they did is they went around to the workforce development agency there in Arkansas, went around to the local industries and asked for swag. They asked for merchandise smart. So students loved what they got to wear like a hoodie. You know, they could win a hoodie that was had a local industry or a local company logo on it. They became walking billboards for the local industry and they just thought it was awesome. So it worked even better than gift cards.

And then the third one, the third areas was enrollment, and that's where there was disparity. It was very different from school to school, and we learned something key about it in the West Baton Rouge, in Louisiana, they had huge engagement like they got everybody enroll by I'm sorry, not engagement. I want to use the word differently enrollment getting them into the app in the first place here in Kansas, very low enrollment. And then in Arkansas, remarkably, it was a total span. We had like 90% enrollment in one school. We had dead zero in another school and a bunch in between. So it was almost a perfect design test. We didn't intended to be that way. It just worked out. And what we found was the difference was all of the ones where we enrolled the students successfully, it all came down to the instructor causing it to happen. And it always happened. Like in one event, they simply it sounds really simple, but it's amazing how it can go sideways. They'd have them in a home room, let's say, they just pull up a screen and it had a QR code and said, Everybody, this is for your phones or your Chromebook, whatever the case, enroll, put in this invite code done, the rest does the work for you. But where it didn't work is when let's say that the instructor just didn't get it done, they didn't end up pulling that screen up and then they said, Oh, I forgot to do that here, let's send an email. And the email, you know, that doesn't work, right?

Jasen: So it really left off the call for action.

Robert: Exactly. And that kind of brings up a little bit of a bigger issue we found, which is CTEs and the stakeholders in career focused education versus you have the instructors and academics. They're doing different things and they really need to be lined up with each other. The problem is, is the state doesn't often incentivize them that way. And so you got folks in academics that are like, This is my English class, and unless it's English, I don't want to deal with it and you folks deal with it. So that has to get worked out school by school. But it's, you know, it's in the works.

Jasen: With all this data, feedback, and insights from the three pilot sites, what can we anticipate for the future?

Robert: This program called Future Ready, we continue to develop new modules in it as we spread out to more and more schools. The schools are the ones that are helping us. They'll have a subject matter expert who comes in and said, I want to have a module in there for FAFSA applications. Cool. Right. And then this next, because we're going to do a campaign in October. Then the next one is like, okay, I want one specific for career fairs. Get them prepped and then run them through the career fair. Okay, great. So as we grow over the next five years, we want to have

just a, you know, a matrix of different modules that can be just any school can pick and choose, but they'll all be inside of this Future Ready program. And we're now because it's an off the shelf product, we're able to just sell licenses to schools right off the shelf, make it really easy. Most of them are buying them on their Perkins funds because they qualify for Perkins. And one last thing on that that's really interesting is where we're headed. I've been telling you about the student experience, which is the most important. But I would say equally important for the school is we found the biggest value proposition is how much time it saves them. And instructors and administrators tend to be overloaded with all sorts of things they're trying to handle and then add on top of it a lot of fatigue from technology.

Jasen: Absolutely

Robert: We found when they bring in Ringer Rank and they're at or particularly the Future ready program, they now have a guideline on what to pay attention to. So it takes less effort and less time to have more of an impact on the students where it's really needed because they have data to look at and it's visualized in a way that's so easy to work with. This was an unintended benefit, but we should have known when we saw what we did with WSU Tech and they were able to optimize the workforce coordinator's work. We found it was exactly the same once we got into a director or a career coach or a career counselor, they have the same kind of boggled mind on one person that has to do with 450 students, or in some of the coaches' cases, it's one per thousand, right? How do you do that? Well, you've got to bring in something that you can just turnkey, turn it on. You're creating that drip. Familiarity is doing a lot of the work that otherwise a counselor or a coach or a course would have to do. And then they can just once a week spend 30 minutes looking in on the data and making some decisions before it's too late. So they're able to see points of failure in the data and do something about it before they're graduated and gone and you have no more access.

Jasen: This tool seems to be well-suited for both education and workforce development sectors, especially quantifying engagement with individuals in caseloads. Another crucial point that struck me is the significant impact of mentoring in apprenticeship programs, particularly in challenging fields like healthcare. If case management is the A-side, could work-based learning function as the B-side?

Robert: Yeah, you know in the kind of the B side of that, that's actually where Ringorang came from. In enterprise, we still have enterprise customers. Of course, we you know, we work with the U.S. Forest Service to try to help have young people who get onto the front lines of fire, you know, when they're firefighters, to actually start working with the senior people in a certain way. So it's

more effective for them out on the front lines, not just taking a course click, click, click or in a classroom, but actually getting out into the world and being more effective. You know, we worked with IBM and Verizon Wireless, let's say, in retail, too, to have people be more effective in their communications and in the health care area, we're now starting to work with Blue Cross Blue Shield in how do they deal with federal employees and customer service? You know, because so they can help somebody actually understand what their health plan is and what a proper regimen is so they can keep them out of the hospital return visits. So you kind of get this, whereas like this one, same technology can help shift behaviors in a, you know, almost an endless different number of contexts. But to your point on case management, this is where future ready is making. The big difference is we found that when it was at the summit, when it came to the ACT summit, I met Chris Guidry from CAEL.

And he says, You got to go talk to my friend John over at Max Grad. So since then I've been working with John on putting a combined solution together for re recruitment of stopped out students and at risk students who are about to be stopped out, all for the sake of getting them to completion. Right and what what you can he they have this great solution Max Grad does that helps work with the school's information system to see where the markers are of at risk when the people who are stopped out, how do you ascertain instantly where they were in their degree path and how far they have to go? And maybe they've already gotten a lot of it done, etc. And then the Ringorang component is to basically market back to that stopped out student, the value of the degree just to complete it, how far they have to go, what path and what future they could really have for themselves versus the direction that they're going now. It's a really powerful notion, so it's part of the future. Scope, we have now is to try to help drive case management that can drive completions on a measurably higher level, which has a huge bottom line impact to the educational institution and most importantly, to, you know, a student getting powerfully into jobs. You want to know what's at the foundation of all this. We learned, Jason, what's that? Mental health?

Jasen: Mental health is often the root of so many workforce barriers.

Robert: And this is full circle for me because of my background, it's like the would, you know, ring a rang. The thing I built turns out to be something you want to point at mental health and how to sustain it for yourself because if you're not well, you're not productive and you're not finishing school or you're not getting powerfully into a career. So we've found that across future ready modules, mental health has been one of the keys. And we've got Wichita State University over here that's been building a curriculum that we're peppering in to all of these area, all these

competencies we're building through Future Ready so that mental health is also one of those supportive threads of information and action that kids can take on and try out things that otherwise it kind of gets left out of school. Now, let's put it in there. Let's help make sure that people are they have a springboard for jumping powerfully into their life with some life skills.

Jasen: As we near the end of our time together, Robert, how might our listeners reach out to you?

Robert: Well, LinkedIn's always a great place. LinkedIn is where, you know, we'll do posts on the work we are doing with Goodwill, getting people out of incarceration into their jobs. We'll do posts on the things we're doing, like I said, with Blue Cross and some of the health foundations around here. But if you just wanted to reach out to me, you can go to the website, which is Ringorang dot com and if there's a specific thing you want to look for there, like you get off case studies or just request a demo or even just say, Hey, I want to talk to the Chief Vision Officer? You know, that gets escalated to me. Otherwise, I would say LinkedIn's probably the best place to watch or ping me.

Jasen: Thanks so much for your time and insight, Robert, on Ready for Work.

Robert: Right on. And thanks for having me. I appreciate so much what you guys do.

Jasen: In the show notes for episode 43, you'll find Robert and Ringorang. Robert referred to the ACT Workforce Summit, the largest gathering of leaders across the diverse spectrum of the workforce ecosystem. We provided a link to explore the summit as well.

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