Episode 61 features Isaac Agbeshie-Noye from the SHRM Foundation, who discusses the Skills First Future initiative and its role in helping employers adopt skills-driven practices and expand nationwide opportunities through Learning and Employment Records (LERs). The conversation explores common myths surrounding skills-first hiring, the challenges employers encounter, and strategies to overcome them.

Isaac highlights key tools available at SkillsFirstFuture.org, including the Skills Action Planner and SHRM's new specialty credential. The episode provides practical insights for HR professionals and their collaborations with educators and workforce leaders aiming to build a high-performing talent ecosystem. Listeners will discover how small adjustments can lead to significant outcomes and why the shift toward skills-first hiring is gaining momentum across various industries.

Voices of Excellence on Episode 61

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Links and Resources

- Episode 61 of the Podcast
- Skills First Future Resources from SHRM
- ACT Work Ready Communities
- ACT Workforce Solutions

Transcript of Episode 61

[Opening Jingle and Music]

Issac: We try to get people out of the mindset of boiling the ocean, or feeling that it has to be perfect. Even trying one thing—just one skills-first practice—can start the momentum toward bigger change.

Jasen: Welcome to episode 61, Employer Engagement for a Skills First Future.

[Jingle] Let's Get Ready for Work!

Jasen: The Skills First movement and LERs, Learning and Employment Records, offers strong potential to align education and workforce programs with employer needs. While these innovations promise better talent matching, some employers still face challenges optimizing their role in the talent supply chain.

Joining us today on Ready for Work is Isaac Agbeshie-Noye with the Skills First Future initiative at the SHRM Foundation, an arm of the Society for Human Resource Management. Isaac's perspective helps us understand what employers face as potential barriers to skills first and LER adoption. We'll discover new action planners and tools for employers to seize these opportunities for skills driven success.

Welcome, Issac, to Ready for Work.

Isaac: Certainly. Thanks for having me.

Jasen: Let's start with some background information on the Skills First Future initiative, and why it matters to SHRM and its network of employers.

Isaac: The Skills First Future is particularly important because we're trying to position employers to be able to advance their work now and beyond. The hope is that, ultimately, we're creating some space to understand what the workforce needs in the moment, and then also how to position it in a time where we're navigating with unprecedented change that causes employers to shift and pivot and reimagine the types of things that they're doing from one moment to another.

We keep hearing about the same challenge. Employers are wanting to move forward in their skills for US ecosystem, but they're not necessarily sure where to start. And so, our foundation, we were uniquely positioned to be able to bring a lot of partners to the table to think about what do the skills for the future actually look like, and how do we meet the needs of employers head on now to prepare them for what is to come.

When we think about this, there's an opportunity for us to unlock potential and performance. We're not trying to think about a movement that's going to replace degrees or to devalue degrees, but it's really trying to recognize here are all of the ways that we can recognize talent, see them, see their skills, and be able to place them and roles that make the most sense for the valuable skills that they offer.

So these skills for a future web hub provides kind of a one stop shop that has a lot of tools and resources, which I can get into in a little bit, that helps employers to understand what skills first crack talent practices look like, and then also how where they might jump in and start trying some things in order to move towards this future.

Jasen: That's a great launchpad, Isaac, and it reminds me of one of the myths that we might to debunk that a Skills First pathway neglects the academic milestones of post-secondary ed. How might we respond to this myth and others we'll need to debunk along the way.

Issac: Yeah, that's an important one because we're not trying to. We're definitely not trying to devalue the degree. What we're trying to do is get to a place where employers better understand what skills are being signaled when they see those degrees, and if there's a way that we can get to that, then we can also understand that in environments that are not necessarily tied to the degree at all, which provides greater opportunity for us to see more.

The part that's really exciting, is that we're not actually trying to alienate the degree. We're not saying that having a degree is not useful. We're just challenging ourselves to understand what we see when we see those degrees. And that's something that that's work, that is iterative, that we're just always going to need to be doing.

We have in some ways understood and package a bachelor's degree as a bachelor's degree, as a bachelor's degree. But we know that your major matters and the types of skills that you get from one major to another, matters what you may gather from an apprenticeship or an internship or a project that you work on. Matters. Degrees don't necessarily indicate those types of things.

We do have to be thoughtful about identifying where all the ways that we can focus, where the only place, excuse me, where we can focus to just understand what this candidate is actually bringing to the to the table. And so it's a really important myth that I'm glad you called out, that we just have to continually work on.

On the employer side I think that there's this understanding that we also obviously want to lean into the skills first space. And I think employers get caught up on wanting to be perfect and doing that right away.

There's no shortage of things you could be doing, and sometimes we just remind people to just try one thing. You don't have to do everything and it's going to take some time for you to figure out what makes the most sense for your organizational context and your geographical location, and your industry size, and your industry scope.

There is a lot of natural and experimentation that comes with wading into these waters. And I completely understand that that is scary. It's scary doing things where you don't know what the outcome is going to be right away but understanding that we're going to learn a lot and trying things and also ultimately you are expanding opportunity and expanding pathways for employment for more people by exploring some of these tactics. We try to remind people about that so that they can stay steadfast kind of in this work.

Jasen: Well said, Isaac. The myth of perfection becomes a barrier to progress. I also appreciate your advice to figure out what makes sense in the context of each employer worksite and their local skilled labor markets.

For employers that understand skills first and want to adopt skills driven practices, we often hear of the barriers of enterprise HR Information Systems. Along with the tech, what other barriers do employers face?

Issac: Yeah. So, the technological integration is the thing that people signal the most as being the greatest challenge to adoption. We have a lot of systems that are engaged in this recruitment to retirement lifecycle, and all of those systems don't necessarily work that great with each other. And in this space where we're preferencing or trying to center skills first, a lot of these a lot of systems are not designed to do that, yet alone then provide a roadmap that is particularly clear to talent or to employers.

That's going to continue to be a hurdle. And I think our systems are getting smarter. But they are. It takes time for them to figure out how to work alongside each other. And then it takes time for us as humans to figure out how to best leverage them. And so big or small, you are running into organizations that are running into challenges related to that.

As I mentioned before, the case around leaning into skills first, I think, has been made for the most part. A lot of organizations generally are excited about the prospect of doing it. What we're trying to do is to educate more, lead us so they get they understand that committing to skills first means committing to it. Even when you identify that you might not be best positioned to jump on the things that you would like to right away. And so, trying to inspire confidence with leaders to continue to chart the course, even when some of the things related to the benefit are things that you're not going to see as a difference between today and tomorrow.

It's going to take some time for you to see what happens to talent. You know, we can't make snap judgments regarding what's working with talent just based on taking a day or a month. It takes a little while for us to see what performance looks like and how aligned people are. And so that's something that we have to remind ourselves that we're not investing in quick fixes when it comes to this, that it is going to require us to continue to chart the course, to push things forward.

Yeah, I think ultimately this work, we think about it as building new muscle. And so we try to remind folks that, you know, you can't go into the gym and pick up a 100-pound dumbbell today, and then tomorrow move on to the next. You have to train your body in order to be able to do that. And so the more that we feel like you integrate this concept in this work into how your day-to-day operations are, the stronger you get.

The Center for a Skills First future, what we have established is trying to make it more unremarkable and ubiquitous. As we say, we're trying to make this more of the norm and not a novelty thing that people are exploring. We've infused a lot of those strategies to kind of help people move along side with us as we try to make this movement more of the norm and not necessary something that feels different or unique. We just want to get to a place where everybody is thinking in a skills first mindset when they're thinking about talent.

Jasen: Let's shift to the supply side, Isaac. What advice would you offer for workforce partners that struggle with low employer responsiveness or utilization?

Isaac: I just want to drive home because I know that we've talked a bit about the opportunities and maybe not so much about the challenges. I do want to honor those and also just name a couple and why we hope that this is, what we are doing, will be ultimately helpful.

We know that like someone, one of the biggest roadblocks that people are running into is around taking a big idea and operationalizing it. And as I've mentioned a few times before, we are really trying to make this the reason why we have this platform of this assessment that helps us curate something is it is trying to be responsive to meet people where they are, because I think a lot of people understand why this is a good idea, but you might get stuck on the how then do I move forward with this?

We're trying to honor the why and also give you some tangible things around the how. And so that's one thing that I just wanted to mention. And then the second thing is, you know, when we talk about this work, we try to get people out of the mindset of boiling the ocean or feeling that it has to be perfect. As I mentioned before, there is a lot of pressure to make some sweeping changes, but we are dedicated to actually showing teams how to implement this step by step. And so we are, even if it's just one thing that we can try, that we know that your leadership is behind. Let's try that one thing and let's see what comes of that, because that'll ultimately get us the momentum to get to bigger things and sweeping things.

The large and enterprise size companies have the resources to invest a lot of things in skills first. We found that there would be a lot of examples of your larger employers, and there's nothing wrong with that. It's just really hard. It's hard for small and mid-sized businesses to relate. And so, we're trying to remind people that doesn't have to be your story. You get to create your own story. And we hope that some of the resources that we've put in place help you to do that in a way that makes the most sense for where your organization currently is existing.

Jasen 6: That's an important perspective for our listeners to understand, Isaac. Thank you. With that helpful background on employer challenges, tell us more about the Skills First Future platform and how we might deploy those resources.

Isaac: What we are excited about when we think about the Center for Skills First Future is that we have these components that are designed to meet very specific needs that we believe employers have when it comes to identifying what to do, and also how to go about then figuring out their path forward. And so, I'll start with our skills Action planner.

This is the place where we tell everybody to start, because it's an organizational assessment that is designed to give you a tailored roadmap to help you identify where you are currently in the skills first phase, and then where you would like to go. It is particularly important for us to map those two things together, because it then tries to figure out where, and what types of resources do you need to get you from point A to point B.

When you get that report back, you get something curated based on how you responded and some resources that we feel like would be great places for you to start on day one. And it gives you two resources for eight vectors. We're giving you a minimum of 16 things that you can think about and consider. And the hope is that you find at least one that resonates with you, that is useful to you, for you to explore what to do next.

That planner sits on what we are calling our Skills First Resource Library. We curate these 16 resources for you as a part of the Skills Action Planner. The library actually contains over 500 resources where there are reports, articles, employer examples. We have a lot of curated tools there that also feature employer tested practices that will help to scale what works, and also just be a knowledge repository of all the things that we know in the skill space right now, which we think is particularly important.

We have for the folks who are farther along enough to know what types of needs you have, but trying to figure out what type of partners you need to engage. We have a vendor database that connects employers to trusted providers to support implementation capacity. Depending on what you need, we have quite a few vendors and there are over 18,000 in total that's sitting in that platform.

That will help you get to where you want to go and provide the services that you need, the professional services that you need to get you there. We wanted to be able to have those types of things accessible to employers. And then the last part is our one-of-a-kind skills for a specialty credential. SHRM, the Society for Human Resource Management already offers quite a few credentials and a lot of different things related to workplace culture and human resources.

We now offer this credential to equip HR professionals and hiring managers to be able to lead and sustain skills for strategies - organization wide. We worked with about five partners to bring together and create this credential, which is really designed to help kind of give everybody the tools they need to keep the momentum flowing and then be able to leverage that to then figure

out, well, how does this make the most sense for my organization or my company and where we are currently?

And so those four components together make up phase one. One of the things that we are doing is seeing how people are navigating these tools. Where are we identifying resource gaps? Where can we be leaning in to create more things? We're using what we are learning since the launch of this in June, to then try and curate even more resources for people and to advance this to a place of really getting it to as many people as we can and making it as accessible to as many types of organizations as we can.

Jasen: Isaac, I am curious about how all of the partnerships came together to offer such a wide array of analytics and solutions.

Isaac: Yeah, I think that, this ecosystem, in order for us to get to the skills first future, we all have to be working towards it. There is a very specific role that I think that the stakeholders, the partners that you mentioned have to play, and that is that employers obviously cannot be having these conversations around skills first in isolation.

We have to be creating an environment where it becomes easier for training providers and the folks that are interfacing with talent early to understand what types of skills are essential for the different career paths that there are. That requires some transparency and some open communication between the employer community and our provider community. And we know that that relationship at times and depending on where you are is great.

Other places have been constrained. So, there's just a really great opportunity for us to get together on the same page in service of what we want, because collectively, what we want is for people to be able to find their way to and through this ecosystem, regardless of if you're a job seeker or an employer or a training provider.

We want those interests to be able to come together to ultimately reduce the 7.2 or whatever the number is right now of millions of open jobs that we have. If we're going to get to a place where we're getting people and their skills to jobs quickly, we're all going to have to be on the same page regarding what that looks like.

I see that there's going to be some great opportunity to leverage this as creating kind of a framework for us to understand what everybody's roles and responsibilities are in this. We are particularly excited because when we get to this Skills First mindset, well, we can't have that mindset exist in a bubble or exist in isolation because it would not make sense to have something be Skills First, and then constantly be engaging with people who have no idea what their skills are.

We all kind of have to be rallying together around this. So as a part of some of the work that we're the next wave of work that we're doing, we're starting to figure out and to think through how employers are engaging with higher education institutions and other training providers in their area. What does that potential look like?

If we were to come together to figure out the ways that we could align our approaches to skills first, then where could we go? What does that look like? How does it change from industry to industry? Are there some things that we can discover that are actually scalable across industry where it works. What are those industry agnostic practices that we should be trying to move forward with.

There's just a lot of fertile ground there for us to be exploring that we need to be exploring because we have to be having this conversation together. And, and we've had so many solutions in the past where problems have been identified. For example, our higher education partners have said, and I was one of those partners, we said, oh, okay, we see the issue, we got it, we fixed it.

Then we realized, oh, okay, the employers are not responding or it's not actually turning. It's not getting us to the outcome that we thought we were going to get to. And that is in part because the folks who ultimately had to take that warm handoff weren't aware that that was their role to play. I think that we have some space to really be having these conversations together. And I'm hoping that now that we have some naming and framing around it, it becomes easier for us to do so.

Jasen: Another positive approach that stands out to me is how the resources do meet employers where they are. Some employers can dig deeper as they're ready and others that need more time can gain exposure and awareness to what's working in skills first.

Isaac: I would offer that both are actually essential. I think that we actually need the widest range of perspective when it comes to this because it's just such a space where depending on where you sit, you show up so much differently. Knowing about what the different perspectives are, I think, really does position you for the greatest amount of success the fastest.

The best way to get started is to engage with our Skills Action Planner. If you go to Skills First Future dot org, everything that you need to start is located there. Our Skills Action Planner will give you an opportunity to identify strengths, gaps and actionable steps to implement kind of the skills based approach effectively. We encourage our supply side providers to do it because, actually, it will give you some insight into how your current or our organization is operating, and being in it gives you then some idea of how you could help navigate that space with employers who are also going through it.

Oftentimes in this work, we separate ourselves from it. Sometimes we need to get involved. I would implore folks, you can see what it would take to kind of get to the reality that we want. And so, we definitely encourage that. From there, as I mentioned, you'll get a roadmap so you can start implementing things.

Then we do have the credentials for folks who are feeling like, I don't know enough about this skills first space. I want to know more. I want to understand how I can make this a reality in my organization, or I want to understand how to make the case so that other organizations will join in some of these conversations to help advance us to a better reality for employers, providers and job seekers.

This will help kind of operationalize that approach. And so, we look at it as something, as I mentioned before, that helps prepare organizations to receive and to honor people from recruitment all the way to retirement. We don't look at this as a one off interaction or intervention. It is actually useful throughout someone's entire trajectory because it's going to impact how they're selected.

It's going to impact how their ability to be promoted. It's going to impact what they perceive to be their transferability from one job or one organization to another. And so, it's going to follow people throughout their careers. We want to make sure that people are understanding that mindset as a part of this. And that's why the credential is always going to be a great approach.

As a result of engaging with all of this stuff we want people's knowledge about this space to be greater. We want their ability to identify a plan for themselves to be quicker, faster and more responsive. We want to give people a language and tools to be able to talk about this, so that we can get to this place where skills first good practices are ubiquitous and unremarkable because everybody's just doing them.

That's just how we think about things moving forward. And so, I think we can get there. We hope that we've put at least some tools in place to help people get there, and we'll continue to iterate on those tools to make them most useful and most responsive to all of the audiences that need to be in the conversation.

Jasen: Thanks again, Isaac, for introducing us to Skills First Future from the SHRM Foundation.

Isaac: Thank you. This was fun!

Jasen: Whether you're an employer looking to take that first step or a supply-side partner eager to align with evolving workforce needs, the journey starts at SkillsFirstFuture.org. Dive into the Skills Action Planner, explore the resource library, and consider the specialty credential to deepen your impact.

As always, we'll include links and contact info in the show notes for episode 61. Be sure to follow, share, and connect with us on LinkedIn to keep the conversation going. Also in our show notes, check out the WorkKeys solutions from ACT to help employers align their skill benchmarks to job tasks and training objectives to reach maximum retention and productivity.

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