

Lessons Earned Podcast Strada Education Network

S. 2, E. 6: Ardine Williams

TRANSCRIPT

Ben Wildavsky, Strada Education Network

[00:00:01] From Strada Education Network, this is *Lessons Earned*. I'm Ben Wildavsky.

[00:00:09] In this podcast, we sit down with education leaders, policy thinkers, and workforce experts who are trying to improve education and career outcomes for students of all ages. We're recording this season remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. And we want to know how this crisis is affecting students and educators and how it will shape our workforce in the years to come. Today, the vice president of workforce development at Amazon, Ardine Williams.

[Audio clip](#)

Ardine Williams, Amazon

[00:00:35] As an employer, part of our role, I think, is to understand what the knowledge, skills, and abilities are for the jobs that we have today. And where are those trends taking us so that we can help people stay current.

Ben Wildavsky

Welcome to *Lessons Earned: Putting education to work*.

[00:01:03] There was a time when workforce development consisted mainly of professional development days and training seminars for middle management, but that's no longer the case. More and more, we're seeing big companies offer their employees these really robust education programs. Whether it's through tuition benefits or in-house micro-credentials, employers have realized that helping their employees upskill is good for everyone involved. So today we wanted to sit down with someone who's right in the thick of it. Ardine Williams is the VP of workforce development at Amazon, one of the biggest employers in the country. And while there's definitely a business case for this kind of workforce development--employee retention, the ability to attract new talent--there's something else happening here, too. These programs give people the opportunity to build skills and move forward in their careers, whether at Amazon or elsewhere.

[00:01:51] While many employers are laying people off during the pandemic, Amazon is actually expanding. They've hired 175,000 people in the past few months, and they plan on hiring thousands more to fill roles at their new HQ2 headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. And even before all of that, Amazon had announced a \$700 million

commitment to upskill 100,000 workers by 2025. Andrew Hanson and I chatted with Ardine about Amazon's big bet on workforce development and how she sees big employers fitting into America's education landscape.

Ben Wildavsky [00:02:30] Well, there's a lot to cover and, you know, let me start just by going backward, if I may. You know, you've had a really interesting career path. You spent five years in the U.S. Army before you moved on to some of the biggest technology companies in the world. You were at Hewlett Packard, at Intel, and now, of course, at Amazon. Can you tell us a little bit about that transition from the military world into the world that you're now in?

Ardine Williams [00:02:53] So my transition from the military was a little sudden. I had my second well-planned child turn out to be twins, and I met my husband in the Army, and as a result, it just didn't work for the two of us to be on active duty, for me to fulfill my obligations with three children under the age of 3. And so I resigned.

And then from there, the transition was a little bit rough. I began my career in the Army. I started working with the Operational Testing Evaluation agency. I was working on field validation of high-tech systems, at the time a global positioning system and something called mobile subscriber equipment, which became the cell phone. And when I got out, about the only job I could land was at Gymboree selling kids' clothes. And it was really frustrating.

And, you know, my dad was just a super supporter. And on the way to work, he picked up this packet of job listings from Syntex, which was a pharmaceutical company, and said, "Just look through there and pick out three jobs where you think, you know, you cover 80 percent of what they're asking for." And in that whole book, there were like 200 jobs, there was one that I thought I might be competitive for, and it was for a tech writer. And surprisingly, I got it. But it was great because it gave me an opportunity to use the tech skills that I had and to leverage a skill that my boss in the Army leaned on: I had the ability to explain really complicated technical matters in a way that was easy to consume, and I wrote a lot of the write-ups that he delivered to the Joint Chiefs for decision making.

And then from there, it was just a matter of, honestly, I mean, I could spin a great silver thread about some great plan, but it wasn't. I simply followed my interests. I applied for jobs that seemed interesting. I had people who were willing to take a chance on me, and I continuously worked to learn new skills. And I've been very fortunate to have a career that's led me down some really interesting paths.

Andrew Hanson [00:04:52] Well, your time in the military has obviously had a major impact on your thinking and how you work. I saw a tweet that you shared recently that said something to the effect of, when you're taking command of an Army unit, no matter the size or the scope of responsibility, you own it on Day One. So I'm curious, you know,

more broadly, how has your military background actually shaped your approach to management specifically?

Ardine Williams [00:05:19] Yeah, there's this Army credo that says, "Mission first, people always, integrity above all." That says that you always have a job to do, and the only way the job gets done is to take care of the people. But there are times where what you get asked to do is very difficult — in fact, harrowing, for the people that you lead. And the only way you can lead is that you are leading with the highest integrity. And so for me, that personal litmus test has always been, how would I feel sitting in a courtroom answering questions in front of my mother or my children? And so I think that it's formed a view that there's a job to be done, and the only way that you do it is by leading people who in many cases have much deeper skills and broader experience than you do.

Ben Wildavsky [00:06:09] Well, let's talk a little bit about the work that you're doing now. So you're the head of workforce development at Amazon. And of course, depending on where you work, that title can mean a whole bunch of different things. So what does workforce development look like at Amazon?

Ardine Williams [00:06:23] The program I'm most proud of that we have is Career Choice. Career Choice is a first-dollar program that pays 95 percent of the tuition to train our associates, our hourly associates, for in-demand jobs in the local community that pay more than we do. And that's really critical because one of the things that I think we learned as a nation during the Great Recession was that it's important to train people and give them the skills that they need to, a) get onto a career ladder, so one that has career progression and moves them up the pay scale and then, b), is available locally. It's really hard to ask people to give up community network support to take a job somewhere that they've never lived or may not have a connection. And so focusing on the jobs that are available locally is incredibly important.

And it also means that as we take associates from the fulfillment center who've got great work experience, grit, determination. They do the training and then move out into the local community, or moving them from our \$15 an hour minimum wage up to a wage that's typically 20 percent higher than what we pay. And that's good for the local community as well, because it creates discretionary income, it helps with the local tax base, and then again, it puts employees onto a career path and fills a need with local businesses that they might not otherwise be able to fill.

Ben Wildavsky [00:07:56] Sure. Well, let's talk about some of the areas that people study. As I understand it, you actually have some fairly clear guidelines, about four or five areas of study, that you are willing to pay people to take on. And I wonder if you can just talk us through what those are and why you've picked them.

Ardine Williams [00:08:14] So the guideline is really around, our tenet is that the jobs need to be, again, pay more than we do, be in demand locally, and are an entree to a career. And that's going to differ slightly from city to city, obviously. But they, in general,

our top three fall, in no particular order, medical, IT, and commercial driving. And so if you think about the medical credential area, it's things like medical assistant, medical technologist, licensed vocational nurses, licensed practical nurses. And the interesting thing about those is they have that, you know, you hear a lot of people talking about stackable credentials. Those kinds of jobs create that career ladder or career path, because the education that you take in one area to become a medical assistant, for example, will in fact apply towards the work that you need to do to be a licensed vocational nurse or a licensed practical nurse. And so it provides what we think of as on-ramps and off-ramps for employees. So I could get my medical assistant credential and then choose, you know, not to leave Amazon and go to work and then move on and get my licensed vocational nurse credential. And then perhaps at that point I decide to leave. But it gives employees the opportunity to to stack those credentials and exit into an external career opportunity when it makes sense for them.

Ben Wildavsky [00:09:46] Yeah. So there's definitely some, it sounds like there's sort of flexibility built in. But one question that comes to mind, you know, on a previous show, we interviewed somebody from McDonald's who'd been very much involved in designing and running their education programs, but they take a very different approach in that pretty much whatever you're interested in, they'll let you study. Whereas you have really tried to focus more, as you said, on demand in certain fields that are the ones that you are OK with paying for the study in those areas, but not just anything.

Ardine Williams [00:10:17] This isn't an enrichment program. This is really, we're the second largest employer in the U.S. and we firmly believe that we have an obligation to create good jobs. And good jobs comprise three things: good pay, and that \$15 an hour minimum wage, egalitarian benefits from Day One. The same benefits that I have, our fulfillment center associates have. And the third piece is the opportunity to add training and skills to experience. And we do that in a wide variety of programs. But when you put those three things together and you add Career Choice, those are good jobs.

Now, the question I get asked frequently is, well, why not train your associates? Why aren't there jobs in the fulfillment center? Well, there are, but it's a very flat organization, and so we may have safety experts, we will have some IT folks, and those jobs are available. But with a large employee base, they aren't always an option because there may not be enough positions open, for example. And so by focusing on those career opportunities outside the company, like advanced manufacturing technicians, for example, we have a much broader array of opportunity that's local for our employees.

Ben Wildavsky [00:11:29] Sure. And then just a really sort of detailed question: If someone is taking a class, is it typically something where they will leave wherever they're working at Amazon, you know, obviously outside this COVID era, which we'll talk about in a minute. But will they go to a campus and study there or take a night class? Or will you actually bring folks in to teach in some space that's at the Amazon work site?

Ardine Williams [00:11:54] That's a great question. One of the goals of the program is also to remove friction in the learning process. As adult learners, these are folks who have full-time jobs. They're demanding jobs. Many have family responsibilities outside of work. Our goal is to meet employees where they are. So in many cases, we bring the training into our fulfillment center. So 60 of our fulfillment centers currently have classrooms on-site, and you know, right when you walk in the door, it's a big glass walled classroom. And the goal there is that if you walk in and I'm taking training and you see me in that classroom, you say, "My gosh, if Ardine can do that, I certainly can do that." And so it creates that visibility. It creates accessibility. So we try to offer the classes before shifts start, after shifts, and on days, because employees work different days, on days that they have free, so that it makes it easier for them to shift either from school to work or from work to school. I know for me the night classes that I took in college, I probably had my poorest attendance record.

Andrew Hanson [00:13:07] So Ardine, with some of these programs, you're actually not, you're actually going back to school and getting a degree. But for the most part, the goal is actually to acquire skills and competencies. So I'm curious, do you think that's where higher ed and workforce development are going more broadly? Less of an emphasis on degrees, more of a focus on skills?

Ardine Williams [00:13:28] You know, it's the current big debate, I think. In upskilling and reskilling, I think that knowledge, skills, abilities, those microcredentials are incredibly powerful because they're very focused on the skills that people need to attain a specific role. The other side of it, though, and this is, you know, speaking from the Amazon perspective, is people in not only tech jobs, but tech adjacent jobs and support jobs are all expected to be facile with data, which means that they have to be able to look at a vast amount of data, be able to draw out conclusions or identify problems, to articulate what those problems are, and then to communicate a potential solution and then assemble a team that can go do that work. And a lot of that really requires the kinds of experiences that many of us had attaining a degree. It's the learning how to learn.

And so I think that knowledge, skills and abilities, those microcredentials absolutely are a path forward. I think that the interesting change that we're seeing is that, you know, when I went to school pre-internet, everything was in the library. And so I went to school and I went to the library and it's sort of like, you know, the squirrels in winter or before winter burying nuts. Right? So you get all the education you possibly can and then go off to the workplace. Well, it isn't doesn't work that way anymore. We're seeing it loud and clear, now in the pandemic, because people are being forced to engage digitally in education, and they are, it's really kind of a mixed spectrum of how that's going. But it really puts a point on the fact that you can add microskills or capabilities on almost a just-in-time basis. And that's not the same model in which I was educated. And so I think we're at this very interesting inflection point and I'm not smart enough or savvy enough to predict which way I think it will go. But I think we're going to see changes in higher ed, and I suspect that the pandemic is going to accelerate those.

Andrew Hanson [00:15:52] So the tech sector has a reputation, which is accurate, as being disproportionately male and white. Do you see these kinds of upskilling initiatives also as an opportunity to promote diversity within management and across sort of more senior-level positions?

Ardine Williams [00:16:12] I think that anything that we can do to create opportunities for people to build skills where they may not have previously had access or opportunity absolutely helps diversity. I'm going to go off topic here: There is a very interesting article today in *The New York Times* about what we owe African Americans.

[00:16:38] And it was this very interesting timeline of slavery, of Jim Crow, of redlining and the impact that redlining had on Black veterans' inability to take advantage of the G.I. Bill and government-guaranteed loans.

[00:16:58] And when you see it laid out in that stark timeline and just the historic repression, it's just staggering to me personally that it's taken this long for us to sit up and take notice. And I'm hopeful that there is enough momentum and enough awareness that we will actually begin to dismantle the segregation and lack of equity in education. Because fundamentally, education is what changes things in this country. And until we fix education, I think that that's where we absolutely have to start.

Music bridge

Ben Wildavsky [00:17:56] Ardine, from where you sit, what do your education programs say about how Amazon thinks about their employees and their capacity for growth?

Ardine Williams [00:18:05] So for me, one of the most interesting things about Amazon is the ability that we have to gain experience, whether it's in the job we have or the next job we take, and the availability and access to that learning. Learning to be curious is one of our leadership principles, and it's probably for me, the one that speaks to me because I am just insatiably curious. Having those programs available, whether it's the Machine Learning Institute, Amazon Technical Academy, which trains non-technical employees to be software development engineers, or the myriad opportunities to our associates through Career Choice. There is the opportunity to take the experience I have and add on to it. And to me, it makes it continually worth that day in my life to come to work. And I hope that, and we aspire to provide that same level of opportunity across our employee base, to give them access to those skills so that they can, in fact, take that next step.

Andrew Hanson [00:19:21] I'd love to just pull back from Amazon in particular and think about the big picture and the long run, if possible, which I know is difficult. But people who are studying the future of work are saying that workers are going to need to be lifelong learners, constantly reskilling and upskilling as they move through their careers.

So when you think about the future, what role do you think employers, especially large employers, play in helping facilitate that learning? We know you're doing it at Amazon. But what would really need to happen in order to allow workers to sort of seamlessly transition through different jobs and careers throughout their lives?

Ardine Williams [00:20:05] You know, it's interesting that it's laid out as something new. I mean, when I reflect back on my career, that kind of lifelong learning has been a requirement. I mean, I learned to program on punch cards, and that's certainly not a skill that's incredibly durable or useful today. I think that as employers, what we look at are, what are the trends? So Machine Learning Institute, those are not specific skills that someone may need in the current job that they have, but they're adding to that quiver of things that they know how to do.

[00:20:43] And it may be applicable in the next job. For our associates in Career Choice, every year we're doing an assessment and working with the Department of, the Bureau of Labor Statistics data, with Burning Glass, with Emsi data, to understand what jobs are in demand. And so as an employer, a part of our role, I think, is to understand what the knowledge, skills, and abilities are for the jobs that we have today. And where are those trends taking us so that we can help people stay current. And sometimes it isn't, it may not be, "Hey, you need to do this. You need to take this specific module of training in order to get to the next job." It may be, "Hey, this is an area of emerging expertise and we think that you becoming familiar with it would become very powerful."

Now, that's going to differ from business to business. If I run a tax accountancy firm, it's important for me that my employees are up to date on all of the jurisdictional requirements for the tax code or what's happening with FASB, and in accounting? That's going to be very different than on the tech side, for example. And so I don't know that there's one size fits all, but I think it's really thinking about what are the skills people have today? What's the direction the business is going and what are those skills? What are the emerging areas, whether it's technology or skills or regulation, that are important for your employees to have command of, so that they can, in fact, continue to serve customers.

Ben Wildavsky [00:22:21] That was our conversation with Ardine Williams. Thanks to my co-host, Andrew Hanson.

[00:22:26] And thanks to our listeners for joining us on *Lessons Earned*.

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[00:22:46] For more information on today's guest and to listen to other episodes of *Lessons Earned*, please visit our Website, [LessonsEarned.org](https://www.LessonsEarned.org).

