

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Guests: Mark Hedstrom, CEO - Skilled Careers Coalition

Run Time: 26:24

Questions or Feedback: thefix@oatey.com

00:00:05 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Welcome to The Fix, the podcast made for the trades, where we sit down with inspiring individuals across the trades to discuss their unique take on the industry, including career paths, job site stories, overcoming challenges, and everything in between. I'm your host, Katherine, a marketer here at Oatey with my co -host and friend Doug, one of Oatey's resident experts in all things trades. The Fix is more than a podcast, it's a community, a community built to support tradespeople and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation. All right, Doug, we've got another spectacular guest with us today and I cannot wait to hear all about how this coalition is doing great things and partnering with some amazing organizations as well as bringing some entertainment to the mix.

00:01:00 **Doug Buchan**

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. All right, so let me get this thing kicked off. Yeah. So today, we're going to talk about bottles, we're going to talk about the sun, we're going to talk about light bulbs, we're going to talk about temperature, we're going to talk about this thing is seen 300 million times a day across the world. Okay. Yeah. Ready? Yeah. All right. So five times hotter than the surface of the sun. It has 1 million light bulb potential capacity. Yeah. Okay. It has leaders and bolts in it. All right. a liter travels 136 ,000 miles an hour. A bolt travels 62 million miles an hour. Yeah. All right. You can put it inside of a bottle and coin a phrase out of it. What do you think I'm talking about here?

00:01:40 **Katherine Lehtinen**

I have no idea where you're going.

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00:01:42 **Doug Buchan**

Well, our guest today is lightning in a bottle. I love it. Okay. This guest I'm very excited for. I thought of him and I thought of lightning strikes and I was like, you know, this is going to mesh together perfectly for us.

00:01:57 **Katherine Lehtinen**

All right, you have a lot to live up to. So I'm looking forward to introducing Mark Hedstrom, who is the Executive Director from Skilled Trades Coalition. Welcome, Mark.

00:02:05 **Mark Hedstrom**

Well, thanks for having me on. Great to meet you both.

00:02:08 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Absolutely. Mark, hey, take us through your kind of career and journey and how did you start the coalition?

00:02:14 **Mark Hedstrom**

My professional journey really started at a young age. I actually came out of healthcare consulting, did that for a number of years. Worked in policy and advocacy and healthcare as well at both the state of Massachusetts level and the federal level. So I did a lot of work early days in what became the Affordable Care Act and Universal Healthcare in Massachusetts. I spent a lot of time in that space in healthcare, so we can always have a long conversation about what's working, what's not in that space as well. Still continues to be a challenge, I think. But the, you know, the opportunity I presented with that was spending about 15 years in that space was working across a number of different organizations, so health providers, both in the U.S. and Canada, and just understanding how different systems worked and ultimately trying to drive towards change. The opportunity from there really just kind of all of a sudden shifted, you know, I had been doing that for a long time, but I also realized

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00:03:00 **Mark Hedstrom**

that while, you know, consulting into businesses, large health systems in the U.S., smaller community hospitals in the U.S., I'd never actually run a business. So I didn't really know what it actually, you know, get on the ground and get your hands dirty with actually running business. So I had an opportunity to transition into action sports and I became the CFO and COO of a snowboard and skateboard company here in Los Angeles. They are a global brand. I am far from cool. So I was a beat kind of guy. I'm also a skier. So it was a little bit ironic that I was working for a snowboard company, but they let me in and I, you know, helped the founder of that organization run it for five years. And that was really educational and understanding how it was, what does it actually take to run a business? Fast forward to another career change. And there's a through line here.

00:03:47 **Katherine Lehtinen**

I love it. No, we're following the journey.

00:03:49 **Mark Hedstrom**

I ended up at Oakley for a bit. I was in their global strategy group. Again, focusing on action sports and manufacturing. Then got a call from a good friend here in Los Angeles. He was looking to step away from his role as the executive director for the Movember Foundation here in the US. That was and still is the global charity that gets men to grow mustaches in November. We focused on prostate and testicular cancer research and survivorship, and then men and boys mental health and suicide prevention. I ran that for about 12 years. And I think, you know, the transition throughout that is just learning systems, process solutions, focused approaches, all the way into actually trying to run a business and understanding how, you know, difficult it can be and challenging, but also rewarding at the same time, to then focusing on how do I leverage my experience into social good. So moving from Movember into the Skilled Careers Coalition was a natural regression for me and looking at, We've got

00:04:44 **Mark Hedstrom**

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this challenge out there, we're all trying to solve for it. How do we apply a coalition approach, a collective impact model that exists in the nonprofit sector to come alongside others that are already looking at trying to solve for this issue and then present solutions together as to how we go after this? So the Skilled Careers Coalition that are pending up here in the U.S. is really focusing on how do we build a coalition around those that are trying to solve for this problem? How do we start doing that collectively so we can move further faster?

00:05:13 **Katherine Lehtinen**

right? No, I think it's a great idea. And we've talked about that just even with some of the guests that we've had, like, oh, gosh, if this group would just talk to this group and what they could do together, because one's going after, you know, trying to educate children at a young age, another one's trying to focus in on high school students, they could really collectively do a lot of great things. So correct. And I love that journey, because I think it's important that all those things you picked up nuggets and pieces that have brought you to the place that you're at today that really allow you to kind of give a different perspective as you're working through this core coalition. So the coalition focuses on inspiring, connecting and converting talent into trades. You know, which of these pillars has been the most challenging to implement and why is that?

00:05:56 **Mark Hedstrom**

Yeah, when we look at inspire, connect and convert. So if we step back and say, what is our role in helping solve for this challenge, we really focus on how do we bring the youth of today to the skilled careers of tomorrow. era. And just to point to that term career, one of the things that we look at versus trades, right, or blue-collar jobs, those dark, dirty, dangerous jobs that often people associate with a skilled career is that there's been a lot of stigmatization around those types of jobs in the natural, you know, conversation people have in general population, the understanding of school counselors, the understanding of parents, the understanding of other educators. And we want to change that paradigm and move away from that stigmatized approach to blue-collar jobs that may have existed in the past and don't exist today, and focus in on how do we create content by youth, those that are already in the skill career, so in CTE programming as students or just coming into their careers,

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00:06:47 **Mark Hedstrom**

to engage and have a conversation with other youth that might be interested. So one of our big challenges up front with that designation and really creating that inspirational network of other youth talking to each other about the opportunity that exists with a skilled career is making sure that we create content that is engaging for those that are looking at this opportunity, right? It's certainly not me. I'm a Gen Xer. I don't have the conversation with, you know, my son who's 11 or other, you know, students who are in that phase of thinking about what they want to do with their lives. But leveraging that opportunity because at the end of the day, what we've noticed, and as you know, we have an unmet demand issue on the other end of the spectrum, right? We have unfilled jobs in this industry sector in this country that will continue to grow if we don't solve for the supply side. So how do we get more students interested in pursuing a skilled career as an option for them alongside the

00:07:42 **Mark Hedstrom**

military or a four -year degree? I think the biggest to your question, the biggest challenge we see, and you pointed this a little bit earlier and why we focus on a coalition and collective impact, is that ecosystem in between, right? Workforce development boards, CTE programs, you know, state, state and federal agencies, those that are on the other end of the spectrum looking for those skilled workers. There's a lot of disaggregation in that ecosystem, right, that recruitment placement pipeline, as we refer to it. And how do we look for partners in the coalition to really come alongside, what are your core competencies? What are your strengths that we can leverage together? What are our strengths? We think one of our strengths is Skills jam, which is that inspire content, that youth marketing led organization that we stood up. But you know, how do we come alongside others and say, Hey, what are our collective strengths? And how do we, again, move further faster, right? We've got a big

00:08:36 **Mark Hedstrom**

problem ahead of us. But we can get there quicker if we start aligning on how we can work together.

00:08:41 **Katherine Lehtinen**

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Yeah, absolutely. And it's interesting, all that kind of ties together, because I was looking at the website where you talk about, you know, military does a great job of marketing, and there are opportunities there, but it's, it's you just have the different branches, but they're the marketing powerhouse, where, with this coalition, it's actually bringing all these nonprofits or groups together to try to create that one voice of what it could be to go into the trades, which I think would be really impactful.

00:09:06 **Doug Buchan**

Yeah, absolutely. You know, I find it interesting now, Mark, that, you know, the youth is somewhat apprehensive about joining the trades, you know, they look at it is kind of dirty. and, you know, I'd rather do stuff on a computer some days. But what does your organization do to bring out that interest in that youth that's on the fence? You know, what do you, what's your process to pull them out and say, Hey, we're here for you?

00:09:34 **Mark Hedstrom**

Yeah, and just to touch on something that Katherine said, and you know, what we're looking at here alongside the military and the for your college degree path for young students is creating a level set that skilled careers can be an opportunity as well. I think there's a positive to come with that. And to your point, Katherine, you know, the military on average in a given year spends about seven to \$800 million advertising.

00:09:58 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Unbelievable.

00:09:59 **Mark Hedstrom**

A football game, you'll see build submarines .com on the side of the field. That is the US military trying to get actually skilled workers back into the workforce course, to support national defense, all the way through to universities. Universities spend anywhere from about \$1 .2 to \$1 .3 billion a year marketing. I would argue that in the skilled career space, everyone, but it's disaggregated, is something of equal weight in terms of the spend per year to get people interested or students interested in a skilled career. But the problem is that the

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messaging is all over the place. It's often very focused on the individual need as opposed to collective need. And so the, the real challenge there is like, how do we start doing this together? And I think Doug, to your question, you know, one of the things that we've realized in our work, and we set up the coalition back in 2022, but we wanted to understand like what the challenges were in that ecosystem. Why aren't we seeing the supply that

00:10:55 **Mark Hedstrom**

we want to see coming through that pipeline? And what we found was, you know, anywhere, and if you go to our websites, go careers .org, we talk a little bit about this supply demand issue and what we're seeing from our research and our conversations to date, which is right now you have about 10 to 11 million CT students in America, right? You've got a gap on the other end, that skilled trades gap that everyone talks about of somewhere between 4 and 5 million jobs today unfilled, and there's a huge need. The problem is that continues to grow, but we're not really increasing the supply side either. So our argument is very simple math. If we have about 70 million people, students, people coming out of the military, so going into, you know, retirement or active, you know, moving from active duty to reserve and then veterans all the way through to those that are coming out of the prison system, there's a real opportunity to be job folks as well as inspire that next generation. So what we're

00:11:51 **Mark Hedstrom**

trying to do is focus on 13 to 24 -year -olds, particularly middle school students. So talking to them younger, if I've learned anything from working in different types of brands and different industries is you've got to brand people young, you've got to get them excited about something when they're younger, and then that middle school, there's opportunity to influence their thinking, and then engage the parents and the counselors as well about reconsidering skill careers and opportunity for them, right, destigmatizing that. So the content we create in skills jam, which is our skills jam platform. So if you

00:12:24 **Katherine Lehtinen**

you

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00:12:24 **Mark Hedstrom**

go to skillsjam .com or you go to Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok and search for Skills Jam, you'll see a lot of the content. It's content created by youth for youth. And that authentic voice is incredibly important because again, as I said, a Gen Xer, if I were to talk about a skill career, I would lose, you know, someone who's 15, 16 years, like that guy is not talking to me. So how do we leverage students who are really passionate about what they're pursuing or those that are just moving into the workforce, to really engage other students that might be open to the idea.

00:12:57 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah, I completely agree. You know, one of, I sit on the board of the SheBuilt Foundation, and we focus on children that are coming, you know, kindergarten, first grade, before they even have the perception of the job, putting it in front of them. And really, it's focused on girls, and letting them know that they can also do the job as well. But I agree, you know, when it comes to middle school, and then also having counselors and parents and teachers. I actually spoke at an event not too long ago and I had a counselor come up to me afterwards and said, how do I get all this knowledge? Like where would I tell my students to go? And for the first time I kind of stepped back and went, wow, I don't know that. And so I've been doing my research just locally to be able to say here's where you would go. I had some things from Explore the Trades that I could say here's a pamphlet and flyer that you can start to talk about it, but I didn't know where to tell her as a counselor to then go. And I

00:13:49 **Katherine Lehtinen**

think all those things are really important for us to step back and look at as we're talking through like, how do we help this next group? And if there was more of a unified approach, I think that would also be helpful for all of those crucial groups to really understand. I agree.

00:14:03 **Mark Hedstrom**

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Yeah, I just to point to that, so one of our key strategic partners, the American School Counselor Association, one of our other key partners is SkillsUSA, right? two organizations that are very focused on CTE or counseling young students through their career. The challenge with counselors, when you talk to them anecdotally, and we've just published some research this past year looking at the sentiment amongst counselors, parents, and students around skilled careers, is that they've got three conversations they're trying to have with a student, and they're overtaxed. So their capacity is very limited to have three points in a conversation. One, how are you doing in school? Two, how are you doing at home, how's your mental health, how's your physical health? And three, what are you thinking about doing with your life? And that's the one that often falls off the conversation because there's just only so much time. Another observation I would have is, to your point is, where do I even go to

00:14:55 **Mark Hedstrom**

educate myself as a school counselor to then have a conversation with a student? And then honestly, if we look back at what we're doing with Skills Jam and how younger individuals and students consume content, it is not on a website, it is not on LinkedIn is not a pamphlet. And that's one of the challenges and opportunities that we have is we've got this disruption that's happening with AI. We've got this ability to aggregate data off the back end and really start providing tools to counselors and then tools that students want to use to explore further. And I think there's a real opportunity in thinking about the coalition and partners we want to bring into the conversation around, Hey, how do we leapfrog what's sort of existing now, which is, you know, very, maybe early 2000s in terms of the approach, you know, if you think that a student is going to your website to find a job, I don't think that's happening, right? It's not happening to a great degree. So how do we change and meet them

00:15:53 **Mark Hedstrom**

where they're already at? And spend time there talking to them about what's happening.

00:15:57 **Katherine Lehtinen**

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Let's take a quick break to highlight West Virginia Women Work, an incredible nonprofit making a real difference. You're on a mission to support education, employment, and economic equity for women by providing job training, career coaching, and hands-on experience, especially in the skilled trades. With a focus on high-demand industries, West Virginia Women Work helps individuals secure higher-paying jobs while also connecting employers with a well-trained workforce. Looking to start a new career or strengthen your team? West Virginia Women Work has a resource to help. If you want to learn more, visit WestVirginiaWomenWork.org. Back to the episode. I have to say, we saw Paige the Plumber, who is one of our favorites. She's actually a part of the Skills Jam, so it's great to see her. She brings a great energy and a lot of great experience. So we actually have a couple of her books right here in the podcast room. So I want to switch a little bit and just talk about what are maybe some

00:16:55 **Katherine Lehtinen**

of the most promising initiatives or success stories you've seen through the coalition that offer kind of hope or excitement for the future of skilled workforce.

00:17:06 **Mark Hedstrom**

Yeah. And I think going back to inspire, connect and convert, right. A lot of our focus in the last two years is standing up, inspire and skills jam is the platform to do that within. Right. So really creating that presence. And we're just eight weeks in to a 24 week content run that we brought on Ty Pennington as our co-hosts for champions league. So if you haven't looked at it on YouTube, Ty is hosting a new champions League actually has pages out there searching for him at the SkillsUSA National Leadership and Skills Conference and Championships. And it's a lot of these young students from SkillsUSA that are talking about their shoes and engaging tie and really kind of showing what's possible and also, you know, highlighting and heroing SkillsUSA because they're an amazing organization. They have this unbelievable 16,000 student run competition every summer in Atlanta that they don't think a lot of people know about, but looking at and seeing how inspired these kids out and how just

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00:18:01 **Mark Hedstrom**

driven they are, it's really quite a great piece of work. And so when I look at that in the inspire space, we've got over 20 million views in the content we're eight weeks in, we've got, you know, aspirations get to worth of 50 million views, but the engagements, the most important piece are people spending time in the site. And between last year and this year, we've seen a thousand percent increase and people spending time on our site and reviewing and looking at other content. So that tells us that we're on a path to really engaging people. So I think building that supply, that inspiration funnel, that awareness funnel is incredibly important to, you know, solving for the supply side issue. In the connect phase, what we're starting to see with building a coalition is that we'll be north of 10 coalition members by the end of this year. Uh, we started this conversation at the beginning of this year and it's a very a broad group of coalition members. So we have those that are in the placement,

00:18:57 **Mark Hedstrom**

recruitment space. We have those that are in the CTE programming space like SkillsUSA, and we have industry partners. So we've got some fairly large brands that are coming into this conversation saying, Hey, we've got a problem too, right? We have a problem with our, you know, in the case of one of our partners below the line talent in Hollywood or in Atlanta, that we need to be filling those roles with qualified, talented workers, because we have to be producing what we do every day. So there's a really interesting mix of coalition members are coming in. And I'd say that's probably the first indication for us in that ecosystem, that connect phase that we're really excited about. Because when we go out and talk about this issue, people are very receptive, and they want to figure out how they can get involved and where they can help.

00:19:44 **Katherine Lehtinen**

And then talk to me about the convert phase. So what is KPI look there? How do you measure what that convert phase is?

00:19:51 **Mark Hedstrom**

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Yeah, I mean, I think, look, our North Star is we know there's only about 10 to 11 million CTE students. That's about 16 % of the 70 million population that we think is open to a skilled career as part of what they're looking at for their future. If we can move that to 24, 25%, that's 6 to 7 million more skilled workers, skilled talent out there in the workforce. So that's our North Star is how do we go from 10 to 11 million to 17 plus million on an ongoing basis. is. The thing I'd say about convert though, and it's back to my comment about, you know, how employers or sectors or industries are looking at that young workforce is, you know, we are looking at that as like, are we converting people into that pipeline? Are we getting them to the point of placement and recruitment? It is ultimately, and part of the SEC's focus will be how do we work with industry partners, those that are employing these individuals goals to look at best practice for things like retraining, retaining, and making

00:20:50 **Mark Hedstrom**

sure that you're actually providing advancement. Because if you talk to younger students, those are incredibly important things. Yes, there's an economic, I want to make sure I make enough money to provide for myself and maybe my family. But the motivation for them is really driven around the ability to advance and increase their skill set. So talk about convert. Our role is to step back and say, how do we help industry employers in the sectors to focus on what are best practices for retaining and retraining workforce and making sure that they feel like they're part of something bigger while at the same time, you know, making sure we're also servicing entrepreneurs, right? Those are out there starting their own plumbing businesses or their own masonry businesses. Like we, we need to make sure that we're involved in that conversion so that we're not creating a whole bunch of supply and then they fall off on the demand side, right? And you lose them in the pipeline of getting them to a job

00:21:45 **Mark Hedstrom**

that they want to do.

00:21:46 **Katherine Lehtinen**

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Yeah, no, that makes a ton of sense. You know, for someone who's considering a career in the trades, what advice would you give to them to see the potential for happiness, financial success, and career fulfillment?

00:21:59 **Mark Hedstrom**

I think from my perspective, if people want to spend time, particularly younger students that are thinking about this, I think there's a conversation to be had with your parents at some point, you know, leveraging skills jam and really seeing what these young students are talking about, how excited they are, and then the opportunity, right? So we have a very small piece on skills jam dot com and skill careers dot org around career matcher. And it's just a basic decision around here is what I'm interested in doing. So giving a little bit of a decision support mechanism to saying, what am I interested in doing? I like work with my hands. I like being outdoors, et cetera. Starting to navigate down that path to say, well, here's some opportunities for you to consider in terms of a skill career. And here's the economic opportunity for you as well. And what we've got to start building in the next couple of years alongside partners is how do we keep that conversation going? So you can imagine,

00:22:49 **Mark Hedstrom**

you know, Ty Pennington talking about, well, I'm interested in construction, I'm interested in building things. Well, here's now Ty talking about his career. So connect into that mentor that has done this for a long time or can be inspirational to that younger student that's just starting to consider because really, from our perspective, like anything else that I've done in my career and others on the team have done is really about how do we raise the awareness and the consciousness while destigmatizing skilled trades to be considered skilled careers, but moving them through that funnel to consideration and then, in this case, purchase in quotes around, I'm going to go and get myself into a CET program and then I'm going to go get that job that I want.

00:23:29 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah, I love it. He's speaking my marketing language right there.

00:23:31 **Doug Buchan**

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Yes, he is. Yes, he is. Matter of fact, if I close my eyes, I thought it was you.

00:23:38 **Katherine Lehtinen**

You know, two things before we close one, which is, you know, most of our listeners are plumbers in the trade. So I would love to know what would you like to see the plumbers of today help for the plumbers of tomorrow? And then secondly, as a brand, what would you say that we should be doing to be a part of this change and how we help revolutionize the industry?

00:24:03 **Mark Hedstrom**

I think for younger workers that are coming into, you know, a plumbing business, if you look at the data, the amount of, and let's just stick with plumbing for a second, the multi -generational approach to building those businesses over time is uniquely challenged right now. In that you're starting to see private equity come into those spaces, right? if there was a big article in the Wall Street Journal about this, you know, buying up HVAC system and businesses, buying a plumbing businesses. I think there's a real opportunity for those younger workers to really help. And we talk about this in our mentorship approach and how we're trying to collapse, let's say a 40 year career into bite size approach of saying, here's where you are today, but here's where you can be tomorrow. And here's who can help you. Um, a lot of that is around intergenerational and I'll use a wonky term for a second, but intergenerational knowledge transfer. So, how do we take what has been doing this for 40 years to

00:24:57 **Mark Hedstrom**

share that knowledge back? Here are the hurdles I had to, you know, challenge. Oh, you get a bank loan. Here's how you start your business. Here's how you buy trucks, right, pricing that back. But I think for younger students that are coming into the workforce, really helping those that are in mid -career or considering retiring from a career, one, shore up their business, right? Is there opportunity to help run that business or take that business over over time? them, but also help them understand how do they market and recruit younger individuals that try to get in the workforce, particularly those that have the soft skills, right? Hard skills, we all know, we can

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teach people to swing a hammer. They can be very good at that. But the soft skills that comes with the actual job and the managerial side and how do I run this business? I think changing, changing that conversation and in some ways it's hard. You know, as I said, I'm a Gen Xer, I'm kind of set my ways. No one can tell me what

00:25:48 **Mark Hedstrom**

to do. But really opening up and listening to your younger workforces and what's important to them because I think that's gonna make you a better employer.

00:25:56 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah, absolutely. Yep. Well, listen Mark I am so excited to follow along and watch the journey of the coalition I really appreciate the opportunity to get to learn a little bit more and Looking forward to figuring out how OD can help partner and support the initiatives that your organization is doing So thank you so much for your time today. Well, thank you for having me on appreciate it