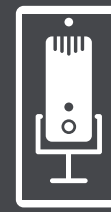


Episode: 63

# Van Ton-Quanlivan



THE  
**MOBILE  
WORKFORCE**  
PODCAST

## Mike Merrill:

Hello, and welcome to the Mobile Workforce Podcast. I'm your host, Mike Merrill and today we are sitting down with Van Ton-Quanlivan, the CEO of Futuro Health, a nonprofit growing a large network of credentialed Allied healthcare workers. So the solutions that she offers in her organization are also applicable to construction because she has honed these skills and strategies while heading up workforce development in the energy and utility sectors, so Van hires similar type of workers to what we hire in the construction space. She's also an author of a bestselling book on Amazon called WorkforceRX, Agile and Inclusive Strategies for Employers, Educators, and Workers in Unsettled Times. Van, also, is the host of a free WorkforceRX podcast. So in today's episode, Van and I are going to speak about the labor gap and how things differ today in the gap that we're experiencing versus maybe what's happened in the past.

Last but not least. We're also going to talk about transferring that knowledge from older generations that have been around longer to these newer up and comers that are coming into our marketplaces today. So we're excited about this. We also want to talk a little bit about how Van stays current for veteran and new employees and how technology can also help while doing these specific things. So thank you Van, appreciate having on today and welcome.

## Van Ton-Quanlivan:

I'm delighted, Mike. Nice to be here.

## Mike Merrill:

Thank you. I appreciate it. Excited to have this conversation today. It's an important one and in our industry specifically. Now you were in the energy and utilities industry about 10 years ago. How do you think that labor gap that went through at that time is similar to what's going on today?

## Van Ton-Quanlivan:

Well, Mike, over a dozen years ago, the energy and utility industry was also experiencing a labor shortage. The specifics is slightly different, but the problem is still the same, which was that employers needed to hire and they specifically needed to hire quality workers who are diverse and have a reliable talent pool. What they were looking ahead was seeing across the energy, the gas, as well as the nuclear industry, that there was an imminent 25% to 50% of its workforce becoming eligible for retirement. And there had been years where there were not any hiring. So many of the production of these workers, the organizations that produce these workers or the community colleges, for example, that produce these workers, they had atrophied during this time. And so all of a sudden the industry was finding itself at the point where it wasn't sure. I would call it a talent puddle.

It was a worried that was going to post and pray, which is a bad place to be when you're thinking that you posted your job and you're not sure whether or not there is even a talent pool out there. So, the good news is that there are playbooks that have been developed. And as you know, the energy and construction industries have many similarity, for example, welders, that's a shared occupation, entry level utility workers, those are shared occupations. And there was a lot that was learned in the energy, gas and nuclear industry that could be exported and has been exported to other industries. So this moment in time is similar and yet very specific to the pandemic. And let me just throw out some very big numbers.

As you know, there's a labor shortage and employers are struggling for workers. You have over 10 million open jobs. You have employers looking for workers at the same time when you have over 8.4 million workers looking for jobs. So there's clearly a mismatch where we don't have the right skills at the right time. And so what are the strategies to close the distance between what employers need and what workers have? I think

this will be a good discussion for the construction audience that you have on the podcast today.

**Mike Merrill:**

Yeah, I sure think so. And I love the term talent puddle instead of pool. That makes a lot of sense to me.

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

Well, Mike, a concept in this talent puddle is that we usually as a company and I'm putting back my company hat, we think we have to tackle these shortages on our own, and that's the natural tendency of most companies. But when it comes to tackling big numbers like these, where there's big structural issues, it's better actually to find partnerships and to collaborate. And I call that ecosystems. Who are the ecosystem of willing partners and even in the energy industry, one thing that we agreed to was that we were going to collaborate. In other words, reduce any individual effort. So we were going to collaborate on our effort, pool together our resources. So we'll collaborate up front to develop the talent pool and then on the back end, we compete for the talent. So we decided to shift where we were going to compete.

**Mike Merrill:**

Interesting. That's an interesting, basically let's all work together to try and get the likely candidates rounded up and then let the best man, woman or person win.

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

Yes. And part of it is, at this moment in time your natural strategies of being able to put up a job posting and getting a person is not sufficient. So one of the natural pipelines to create the workers is through your higher education system. There's what I call the dilemma of the fire hose and the garden hose. Higher education tends to train people in groups of 25, for example, if they have too few students, they're going to cancel the construction course or the construction program, construction management program, or the welding program, or any of those programs. And then employers drip out jobs like in a garden hose. So here's a one job, two job, three job. That is not sufficiently interesting for education to step in.

So how do you begin to remedy this situation so that you could activate higher education to bring in candidates, get them ready for day one while employers have this phenomenon of dripping out jobs and one way to do it is to aggregate your jobs. So for example, instead of dripping out jobs, you begin to pool your jobs so they all come out at the time for when the graduates are going to come out. So, that's one way to do it.

The other way is to pool together your supply chain and even the hiring of your competitors. So, we also did that. We brought a whole bunch of companies together in order to add up all of the hires that we needed, and that made it more interesting for education to set up their program exactly for what we needed trained. And so, yes, that's like getting two systems to, getting the employers and the higher education to more efficiently work together.

**Mike Merrill:**

So is that like a mini job fair of sorts. Is that kind of what you put together?

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

It's beyond just the concept of a job fair. Workforce development is what you do when you're not sure that you can just transact for the job. If you have a job fair and you can get what you want, then that's great. If you can put it on a posting and you get what you want, that's great. Workforce development takes a little bit more work. For example, we needed to create utility workers for the company that were day one ready. Our company even tried to go out, reach into community organizations, but they would get one out of 30 individuals who could actually pass the drug tests or the background tests and that's not even our pre-employment tests, which are written tests. And so it was a miserable experience for the company. Instead, the workforce development model is a model of the three legged stool where each leg of the stool does what it does best.

So as an employer, what you should focus on is identifying and articulating what you need to hire, your requirements for hiring, and then focus on hiring. The second leg is a network of community organization and public agencies called Workforce

boards. They're funded publicly. They can go out deeper in communities to scout and recruit candidates, and actually case manage, handhold the candidates through your pre-employment process. They can also ensure diversity. So they'll screen candidates for you based on your requirements as an employer.

And then the third is education. So education should close the gap between where those candidates are and what you needed. So for example, we wanted to do these energy apprentice line workers, and to build up that, they climb poles, they fix energy, in the middle of the night when the storm hits you and the power's out, who do you call? Well, they're deployed line workers and they get trained through our apprenticeship program. We said to the community organization, "We need people who have a driver's license, no felonies. They need to have certain spatial reasoning, and they need to be physically fit, and they need to pass our pre-employment tests." So the community organization went off and created a short list of candidates for us.

The education program, it turns out that the group, and this was a veteran's group that they were recruiting, they were not physically fit, which was very surprising. So they actually created a three month curriculum that not only included introduction to electricity, introduction to the industry, but there was a whole sports conditioning curriculum because they needed to pass that on our physical fitness requirement. And then there was also a number of candidates who were failing the questions around spatial reasoning. So, they augmented their curriculum with some workbooks that were all around practicing spatial reasoning and doing it in a time test way. So, they actually were able to customize curriculum to what we needed to close the gap so that more people were ready for day one.

**Mike Merrill:**

Yeah. That's great. Very proactive approach and it's fascinating that it was able to come together like that so you could all work collectively for the greater good. Once companies did that, what could they do individually to help entice an employee to be attracted to their company over their competitors? Any ideas?

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

We talked about how we collaborate on the front end and then at what point do you begin to compete. While the students and these, we're talking about adults, are in the training program, as they're moving along, that's a good time to come in and have one of your employees talk about your company and the roles in your company, and what does it take, how to apply. So those are the moments when you start marketing yourselves to these great candidates.

**Mike Merrill:**

I like the idea of having one of their potential peers be the voice for them that's on the same level as them. It's great. Sounds very effective. Are there some other approaches as well that seem to be helpful?

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

Well, I know that when we were doing the welders, we needed not just the regular welding, but we needed actually arc welding, which meant the welders had to... Imagine big pipelines, you're trapped under the pipeline and you're welding big pieces together and it may be raining and underground in the dark. So there was some very specific technique. And as an employer, we wanted that specific specialty on top of regular welding. So to close the gap, we looked around at all of our community colleges, for example, and then we picked the best of those that was the closest curriculum to what we needed and in the location that we needed. And then we invited those instructors to come cross-train with our own internal master welders. And then they learned, yes, they learned the arc welding technique and they took it back into the classroom.

**Mike Merrill:**

Oh, that's fantastic. So basically they're sharpening their skills and best practices and bringing that back to the rest of the group.

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

Yes. And we'd also did that with mechanics. My company had about 300 plus mechanics and there was also imminent retirement. We were one of the earliest to roll out electric vehicle fleet and the problem was

that the manufacturer couldn't even keep up with the training, so they couldn't deploy the training. And the dilemma was, as a mechanic at the company, if you touched one of the vehicle and you were not certified in the new way, it would void the warranty. So you could see this is an operational issue. There, what we did again, because that technology had been so new, nobody was teaching against it. We actually invited seven community colleges to come in, and you can do this with community colleges or other education partners. Those colleges were in the geographies that we needed. And then we cross-trained, we got the manufacturer's permission to cross-train those seven colleges in the curriculum.

Our master mechanic trained those seven faculty mechanics, and then they trained our 300 mechanics across the state, all in a window within a month. It was a very efficient way to do it, a low cost way to do it. And what's even better is that now we had seeded the public system of colleges with the new knowledge and so from then on, they would be teaching all their subsequent students how to do that new skillset and it became less of an issue to be able to recruit, because we started opening up the number of workers who actually came with that skillset.

**Mike Merrill:**

Wow. That's fantastic. I know in the construction industry, that's a huge concern right now, is that transfer of knowledge with all of these new employees coming into the industry, which there's a big shortage of. And then we have the largest percentage of the industry are these baby boomers that are set to retire, or already even past retirement age. What other recommendations would you give to companies to try and deal with this aside from just the cross-training that you mentioned?

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

Oh, Mike, I'm glad you brought this up. An initiative that we worked on with the operations was really in this space of knowledge transfer. There was so much worry as the boomers were exiting, what knowledge was critical to the operations of the business? And so the question that we had to ask, all the people on the front lines, the frontline supervisor is, what knowledge

is mission critical? And who had that knowledge and is that person at risk, either leaving the company because they're getting snatched away or retiring?

For my company, there were some individuals who knew, for example, how to access certain equipment and it wasn't mapped out. It was one of these tribal knowledge things that was never documented. Once you end up with a short list of these are sort of mission critical, it would handicap the operations if it weren't transferred, then you can begin this process of very systematically transferring knowledge.

What does that mean? That means like the person who has the knowledge and the person who receives the knowledge, what are the five or 10 things that need to be passed on and really just continuing to have HR conversation to make sure that the group that is going to inherit the knowledge is successfully closing the gap.

**Mike Merrill:**

I think, and you mentioned some of the industries that have crossover into nuclear energy, also construction, but I know in the welding trades, there's a lot of expert welders that have been doing it for 20 or 30 or even 40 years. And I know that from a lot of the other guests that we've had on, there's just a very small crop of new potential employees to even train that are interested in welding. So what have you seen in that space, and do you have any recommendations for companies that are facing that challenge?

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

Yes. And what the education people would say is that, they could set up a program, but students don't naturally come. We heard that both in programs that we were trying to set up in order to create workers for entry level workers in the nuclear area, but, entry level worker, for example, in the welding. So what we, as the company committed was to stand by that program. So for the welders, we not only cross-trained their faculty to get that extra arc welding skill, but we brought out all these blue trucks into the community and at their job fair, et cetera, and then helped them promote. Because what that meant was that we were vouching for this program, that we're hiring on the back end. And that actually increased the volume of students

who are interested, which also improved the quality of the candidate base that came out. And so it revitalized these programs.

We saw that happen in the electrical and power line systems that we set in place, the arc welding we've set in place, but this is a very proven playbook. Once you have the programs that you believe in and it's got the curriculum that's going to produce the workers that you want, stand with that program, stand next to that education provider. That's a signal that there's employment on the back end. And that will increase the community interest in your programs.

**Mike Merrill:**

Oh, I like that. So you're saying go out of your way, take extra initiatives to bring attention and awareness that this exists so people could naturally become curious and potentially interested in.

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

Absolutely. Yes, it works.

**Mike Merrill:**

Love that. So obviously with the technological advancements of what's going on today, how do you see technology playing a role and helping to continue to address this issue?

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

Well, technology can be useful in a number of ways, especially when there's a shortage. You are going to have to reach deeper into and develop that talent base. For example, we had a tree trimmer population and a set of companies that were our subs and they tended to be Spanish-only until you get to the supervisor level. Well, those individuals love to climb trees. So they already have the natural aptitude, they're working outdoors. They would be perfect for line worker jobs, but you need to work on their English. Now, the good news is that there's a lot more technology enabled through your phone, where you can build English readiness skills that is not general, but very specific to the work because adults like and do better when let's say their language training is specific to the work. And

there's now a lot of solutions, thanks to the internet that is enabled through your phone.

The other area that I think we need to always be thinking about is the digital skills. So much is enabled through all sorts of mobile devices and computers. Even those mechanics that I talked about, many of them, they were trained on combustion engines and moving to electric vehicle meant that you're moving into computers. Now, if you were to say, "Hey, Joe and Jose, we want you to go to a Digital 101 class, a digital skills class." They're going to say, "No." They just don't show up. But if you said, "This is your electric vehicle maintenance course, and you embed those digital skills into that course, again, adults learn better when it is in context of work. They'll show up because it's related to the work. So a little bit of how you position the training, just always tie it back to the work, embed it in the work, whether it's language training, whether it's digital skills, that will always be better received by adults who work is their priority.

**Mike Merrill:**

Yeah. I love that. I know in our WorkMax application, we have a language preference setting in the mobile app so that end user, if they prefer the Spanish language, all of their navigation in the app is in Spanish. And that has been immensely helpful for companies everywhere. It's a giant bridge that we're able to help companies fill the gap on with these employees adopting the technology.

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

That's good to know.

**Mike Merrill:**

Yeah. Do you have other examples or things that you've heard of as it relates to that type of technology, adopting Spanish or helping make things more convenient for employees that have that language preference?

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

We have similar issues in the healthcare industry. For example, we have a lot of Spanish speakers. 48% of households in California, Spanish speaking. I'm



sorry, I'm sorry, 38%. If you have people from the culture actually working as healthcare providers, it actually results in better care. So you actually want to encourage those language skills in there. We have a partner named Voxy and we created a whole English readiness for Allied Health. So you could actually create English readiness for construction or English readiness for a specific occupation and that would be building up their vocabulary so that they can begin moving from their in-language app, like what you offer into English based mediums. It builds their confidence to be able to engage in English.

**Mike Merrill:**

Yeah. I love that. It seems to me it would be similar if you were going to travel to, maybe if you're from the United States and you're going to travel to Italy for a vacation, or if you're going to go to Mexico or somewhere else, you might learn some basic words and vocabulary that would help you at least navigate and get by. And so what you're saying is create something similar for the construction trade so that they would have those basic skills at a base.

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

That's right. And again, it goes back to this, if you can just put up that job posting and there's no problem getting the people that you want, then you don't have to put in the extra effort, but if it's not happening and you're struggling, then these are some strategies that are proven and that you can do it with your competitors or your supply chain and other partners, so that it's common effort and it's less effort for any one company.

**Mike Merrill:**

Yeah. I think this is fantastic. I got back late last night from a trade show, the World of Concrete down in Las Vegas. And in its heyday of busyness in the market, they would get well over a 100,000 attendees at that event. And I know that many people that I spoke with the last few days this week, all expressed the same thing, and it didn't matter what part of the country they were from, or even if they were in some cases international, they are not able to fill all of the positions that they need. They have so much work that they just can't get to. And so I think these different

recommendations and this advice is fantastic for companies that I just barely spoke with this week that are having challenges. And really, haven't probably gone to these levels to get creative, to try and fill these labor gaps that they have. So I appreciate you sharing that.

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

Absolutely. They should know that they don't have to go at it alone and that there's proven playbooks and strategies that they can deploy.

**Mike Merrill:**

I love that. So I did want to bring up before we wrap up, I wanted to congratulate at you on your book. Obviously that was awesome. And just wanted to give you an opportunity to plug it and maybe tell us a little bit about it if you could. Does that sound good?

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

Oh, absolutely. Mike. I talked about some of these strategies, I highlighted some strategies, and one thing I wanted to do is just lay them out in the book. And it's called WorkforceRX, Agile and Inclusive Strategies for Employers, Educators and Workers in Unsettled Time. And it's all about the focus on how do you connect the right people with the right skills at the right time for what we need. What I did was I laid it out in easy to read format which is really, what was the challenge and then what was the solution? So 10 chapters, 10 challenges, 10 solutions. Super easy read, and it's become an Amazon best seller. So hopefully people can look it up because again, they don't have to go at it alone and the solutions do exist. Proven solutions are already out there that they can employ to deal with this workforce dilemma that we have.

**Mike Merrill:**

Well, that's fantastic. I can't wait to have an opportunity. I'll order one too and I'd like to read it and learn about it.

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

Please put an 5 star on the reviews.

**Mike Merrill:**

I sure will. I understand the value of good reviews, no question about it. So just a couple more questions to wrap up. Again, encourage listeners to check that book out. Sounds like a fantastic read for all of us in business and their entrepreneurs, probably get some ideas to help in your business as well. But to wrap up Van just wanted to ask, what's something that you are grateful for in your professional life, throughout your career so far.

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

Well, Mike, I have a bit of a humble beginning. In 1975, my family escaped from the Vietnam War and we were fortunate to come to the United States. There was a lot of struggles because we didn't understand the new culture. I had to learn English and so forth, but I've always been so grateful for the opportunity. And so the work that I do is really paying forward the opportunity that I had to others. And that's the work that I do right now in Futuro Health, to open up opportunity for others.

And so what I do feel very grateful for is that throughout my professional life, I've had the touch of mentors along the way who have inspired me to think bigger about how to magnify impact. And so I really appreciate that you allow me to speak about my book, which is really, once again, how do you take the lessons learned so that others... We can magnify impact, because given the large number that I shared, the over 10 million, 8.4 million, we're going to need all parts of the nation revving. It's not just public, it's not just employers. It's not just educators. It's not just community organization. It's not just labor. It's all of us, all of these engines have to rev and work together to move people into good jobs that employers care about.

**Mike Merrill:**

I love that. Well, Van, tell me this, what is a superpower that you've developed and that you embody, you feel in your life?

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

Well, I think my superpower gets unleashed when I work on this sense of purpose to pay for opportunity to others. I become embolden in that way, and I'm so

fortunate that in those moments, I've been able to take risks and try out many of these strategies in the private sector, but also in the public sector and now in the nonprofit sector, to see if they still hold true. And the good news is that many of these strategies are repeatable and do work. So thank you, Mike, for having me on this podcast.

**Mike Merrill:**

Yeah. Thank you for joining us. You're a pretty amazing individual, and I appreciate the wisdom and the expertise that you've shared with all of us. I hope that others will be able to take advantage of learning about this now and implement it into their business to help them continue to grow. So again, you're paying it forward will actually also bless their lives as well.

**Van Ton-Quanlivan:**

Thank you, Mike. It's been a pleasure.