



## WORKFORCE LEADERSHIP ACADEMIES

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# Transcript — Stephen Tucker Interview

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## Description

Sheila Maguire and Dee Wallace, Aspen Institute EOP senior fellows have a conversation with Stephen Tucker. Stephen was in the final cohort of the Murano Fellows for the Sector Skills Academy, and is the founding president and CEO of the Northland Workforce Training Center in Buffalo, New York. The Northland Workforce Training Center was the signature workforce initiative under New York State's Buffalo Billion.

Sheila and Dee have been lifting up a conversation about talent development in the workforce development field itself of late. We are thrilled that they have taken some time to lift up the story of alumni, Stephen Tucker, whose work and leadership is incredibly inspiring.

## Speakers

- [Stephen Tucker, MBA](#) - Northland Workforce Training Center | LinkedIn
- [Dee Wallace](#), Senior Fellow, Economic Opportunities Program, The Aspen Institute
- [Sheila Maguire](#), Senior Fellow, Economic Opportunities Program, The Aspen Institute

## Transcript

### Dee Wallace (00:03)

Hello, I'm Dee Wallace, Senior Fellow with the Aspen Institute's Economic opportunities Program, and I'm joined by my colleague and senior fellow Sheila McGuire. We've worked together for many years now supporting local and national academies that bring together senior leaders from across the workforce ecosystem in yearlong

academies, when they learn together about workforce development and increasing economic opportunity for all. In this past year we partnered in eight communities to launch local academies in which we are training others to use that model at the academy. And we've been lifting up a conversation about talent development in the workforce development field itself, and we wanted to take some time this year and lift up some stories of our academy fellows and alumni whose work and leadership inspire us, and there are very, very many of those. Today we're joined by Stephen Tucker. Thank you, Stephen, for joining us for this.

**Stephen Tucker (01:17)**

Thank you guys for having me. I'm really excited about this opportunity.

**Dee Wallace (01:21)**

Stephen, you were in the final cohort of the Murano Fellows for the Sector Skills Academy, and you're now the founding president and CEO of the Northland Workforce Training Center in Buffalo, New York. Tell us about Northland.

**Stephen Tucker (01:42)**

So the Northland Workforce Training Center was the signature workforce initiative under New York State's Buffalo Billion. Our mission is to train and prepare local residents for outstanding careers in both advanced manufacturing and clean energy. And the whole reason why we exist is because, as a region in the five counties in Western New York, we are projecting to need to fill around 20,000 job openings, mainly due to retirements, both the clean energy sectors and the advanced manufacturing sectors, having an aging workforce and a non-existent talent pipeline. Young people are either not aware of, interested in, or have the technical skills necessary to fill these positions. In addition to the high number of positions available, these positions' average salaries are around \$70,000 per year. So by focusing on building a talent pipeline for the advanced manufacturing and clean energy sector, specifically in Buffalo, it's also a poverty reduction initiative. So we opened in 2018, and so far we've been pretty successful at enrolling and preparing local residents for these outstanding careers.

**Dee Wallace (02:52)**

Great. Now, it's called Northland Training Center, but it's more than that, right? Tell us about what else you've envisioned in that region and why.

**Stephen Tucker (03:04)**

So the whole vision for this whole project, which is officially called the Northland Beltline Redevelopment Project, really focuses on place-making; how do we invest in places leveraging assets in the community

where we can have the biggest impact on a high number of people. It's an economic development strategy in addition to a workforce development strategy. So with the Buffalo Billion, we revitalized around 35 acres of an old industrial space. Just imagine: an old industrial space right next to a neighborhood that back in its heyday used to employ thousands of people. Literally thousands of people worked in this campus and used to walk to work. But like many of the Rust Belt cities in Buffalo, starting in the 70s and 80s, some of the factories closed, the jobs dried up, and the area deteriorated. According to the American Community Survey from 2015, the median household income in the residents, the neighborhood immediately outside of Northland Workforce Training Center, was around \$23,000 per household.

So this is more than just a training center. We envision revitalizing this industrial campus, not only to train the workforce, but to also attract businesses from outside of the region into this campus specifically. In addition, we wanted to bring additional resources to the community. So now we have a banking institution, Bank on Buffalo. They're co-located within the facility. We have a restaurant, we have a place where you can get healthy food. They're located within the facility. We have other companies, businesses, creating jobs: Garwood Medical Devices, Rodriguez Construction. So this is more than just a training center. It's really a revitalization opportunity for us to revitalize a community that was left behind for so many years.

**Dee Wallace (04:57)**

Wow. And how did you, coming in as the leader of this work, make the case with the employers and the public sector that were sponsoring the training center? How did you make the case for a bigger vision?

**Stephen Tucker (05:17)**

It was really imperative for this vision because, or for this particular project, because when businesses can't find a qualified workforce, they really have limited options. And a couple of those options are very negative to a community and to an economy. The first option is they can automate. They can automate, which eliminates jobs, or they can relocate where they can find qualified talent. So making the case for the businesses was easy. They needed workers to fill these roles. But making the case to the community was also a pretty convincing story because as we are creating jobs, training people for these jobs, we're now able to create access to opportunities for people who were historically left behind.

**Dee Wallace (06:12)**

Right. I mentioned we first met you when you were part of the National Sector Skills Academy. You were a Murano Fellow. You were in Ohio at the time, right?

**Stephen Tucker (06:25)**

Yes.

**Dee Wallace (06:26)**

Tell us how you got to Buffalo. When did that happen and how did that happen?

**Stephen Tucker (06:33)**

Interestingly enough, I went through the Sector Skills Academy back in 2013, and it was one of the most profound and impactful professional development opportunities for my workforce career at the time. At the time I had been in workforce development for about 10 years, but participating in the Sector Skills Academy really provided me not only with best practices, but also a national network; a network of alumni, a network of fellows who I can tap into to help implement different strategies and best practices. But to specifically answer your question around how I went from Cincinnati to Buffalo, New York, I was actually contacted by a headhunter. When I was in Cincinnati, Ohio, I worked at a workforce intermediary called Partners for a Competitive Workforce, and we were focused on closing the skills gap in five industry sectors: healthcare, manufacturing, information technology, supply chain, and logistics. And I managed our work in advanced manufacturing, and because of some of the work that I was able to be successful at implementing, aligning education with industry, launching apprenticeship programs, developing career pathways, I developed a national following.

The folks in Buffalo heard about the work that we were able to accomplish in Cincinnati, Ohio, and they reached out to me to see if I would be interested in pursuing this opportunity. And what attracted me to this opportunity was the opportunity to really start something from scratch. It's a \$65 million investment, \$59 million in revitalizing the facility, \$6 million in equipment, and implementing some of those best practices I've learned over my career. So in my opinion, it was really a match made in heaven, and I'm super thankful and grateful that Buffalo and West New York entrusted me with this opportunity.

**Sheila Maguire (08:24)**

That's great. Stephen, we recently, as you know, posted a blog that we rather, maybe sillily, because I don't know how many cobblers we have left, but the cobbler's children have no shoes. Do I have to do a little disclaimer here what a cobbler is? Which really raises the question of whether the workforce development field can treat its own workers as we are encouraging employers to treat their workers. We look at the important focus on job quality that is a mandate now, the important issue of race equity within the employer situation, and think about that's a mandate for us to really work on and how are we doing on that level ourselves? And I know that you have many perspectives on the workforce field.

In your experience in life, you have seen this system from many places. And I wondered if you could talk a little bit about how this issue of the workforce workforce itself, how you've encountered that, how you've dealt with it in the leadership development we do in the sector skills in the academy, and we did the sector skills and now we're doing it in this academy where you get 360 feedback on. One of the things is Model the Way, and just really interested in hearing your reflections, given all the different roles you've played in the system, about how that's challenged you as a leader in your current role and in previous roles you've had in the workforce field.

**Stephen Tucker (10:08)**

That is a great question, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to respond to this. But I was fortunate in my career to have great role models, to have people who invested in me professionally

and personally. One of my role models is Janis Urbanek. She is one of the alumni fellows. She encouraged me to take advantage of professional development opportunities every chance that she got. I believe that oftentimes in the workforce development field, for some reason, we don't necessarily invest in the next generation of workers, teaching them those best practices so that they can expand and grow the field. And when you think about it, how does one end up in workforce development? We just ended up here. It's not like when I was a young man, I aspired to be in workforce development or education. I just landed in this role. But now that I'm in these roles, I love helping people.

Also, previously I was an instructor, an adjunct instructor, at a four-year university where I taught organizational development, organizational culture, and organizational behavior. So I understand the value of lifelong learning, and understand the value of investing in your colleagues and your employees so that they can develop professionally to provide services to the customers that we are serving. I also understand the need to develop the next generation of talent. And I believe my experience as an instructor, my experience working with Janis Urbanek, who was a mentor for me personally, all led to me role modeling the behavior. It's critically important for leaders to role model the behavior, not only for workforce practitioners, but also job seekers as well. So I'm a firm believer in that, and I take that very seriously.

### **Sheila Maguire (12:08)**

And how, within other ways that you think about it in terms of Northland, are there ways, parts of your, maybe on your journey within the workforce where we all end up, who knows how we ended up in workforce development? Are there particular challenges or responses you've had to deal with or push for to have that investment happen for others as well?

### **Stephen Tucker (12:33)**

Well, fortunately in Buffalo and the Northland Workforce Training Center, because I am the president and CEO, I get to set the tone. I get to set the standard. I have a leadership role, not only within this organization, but in the community. And I advocate for other workforce development organizations really to have a collaborative mindset. Because if you think about the skills gap that we all face in every industry sector, it's so big, you're going to need all hands on deck to resolve and to address those skills gaps. So having a collaborative mindset, I have a philosophy, "Do what you do best, partner for the rest."

Also elevating everyone in the field so that we can have a workforce ecosystem that's responsive not only to job seekers, but to employers. Almost having that collective impact mindset and approach when it comes to implementing these strategies. And I think once we've had some success and some small wins, we can now start to see momentum being built so that we can have a bigger impact. Everyone wants to be a part of a winning organization, a winning strategy. And once you demonstrate success, then I think it's easier for others to come along.

### **Sheila Maguire (13:51)**

Right, right. No, that makes sense. That makes sense. I know, just one quick follow up, I know that you've spent a good bit of your early career as a job developer. Is that...?

**Stephen Tucker (14:06)**

Yes.

**Sheila Maguire (14:06)**

And I'd love to, just thinking about your own career path there, how do you think that...? Is that a good place for people to start in this career, as a job developer? Talk a little bit about that journey up to the leadership you now have. That would be, I think, of great interest.

**Stephen Tucker (14:26)**

Ironically, the way I ended up in workforce development was, I was a program participant. I actually started off in a program in Cincinnati, Ohio with the Urban League of Greater Cincinnati. And I worked for the Mayor Summer Youth Program. Every city, every county has the summer youth program, working with young people, teaching them workplace skills, expectations, soft skills, and placing them in unsubsidized employment. So that was my first opportunity. But then that transitioned to a job developer for President Bush's, the first President Bush, Prisoner Reentry Initiative.

**Dee Wallace (15:04)**

Oh yes.

**Stephen Tucker (15:05)**

Developer under the Prisoner Reentry Initiative. And I was responsible for placing thousands of ex-offenders, returning citizens, into employment opportunities. And I was very successful. I was recognized in 2008 in the state of Ohio by then Governor Strickland for placing more than a thousand ex-offenders in employment opportunities. So I feel like I benefited from my experience as a program participant, as a job developer for youth, as a job developer for reentry. I then advanced in my career to run my own department, became a vice president. So I almost feel like, coupled with the professional development and workforce development that I was able to receive, I was almost in an apprenticeship program without knowing it for a leadership role. I got the hands-on experience, the related technical instruction, and now I get to apply everything that I've learned over my more than 20 years in this sector.

**Dee Wallace (16:09)**

It's so powerful to me to hear how you have gone throughout your career and paid attention to walking the walk and modeling the way with your employer partners, and now with your own organization that you're running. Could you say a little bit more about the opportunities that you've had to work with different employers, different organizations, and encourage them to model the way and walk the talk?

**Stephen Tucker (16:44)**

Yeah, definitely. I can recall as a job developer for reentry, and I mentioned I was responsible for placing returning citizens into employment opportunities, and I would go to different job fairs and

different hiring events, and I would talk to HR managers and say, "Hey, we have this program, and it's designed to prepare people for work and teach them how to come to work on time and to dress professionally," and trying to play into the right thing to do strategy. And I remember I got rejected over and over and over again, and because this was my big break professionally, I really didn't want to fail. So I came up with a different strategy where I spoke with a hiring manager. I said, "Hey, you guys have 20 positions open. How about you share with me the job description? I'll take a tour of your facility to learn the environment, share with me the shifts, right? We partner together. I can then look at my caseload and identify 20 people that'll be a perfect fit for your job."

And he says, "Okay, I'm going to give you a shot." That's what he says to me. So on the back end, we had our trainers preparing all of the students with their job readiness training program, making sure that they were ready to go to work. I then interviewed the participants and I selected the top 20 participants, and he hired all 20, which was unreal to me. So then he called me back like two weeks later, and he said, "Hey, Stephen, do you have any more folks for me?"

So to make a long story short, we became partners in terms of connecting him with qualified candidates for his employment opportunities, and he became an [inaudible 00:18:35] champion for me. That led to him inviting me to Human Resource Association meetings. I developed more employer partners. That also led to me being able to provide those partners with job quality strategies in terms of salaries, shifts, coordinating different resources for their employees, making sure their employees understood the value of their 401k. So developing that relationship to where we not only became partners, but those employers became champions advocating for some of our work and advocating for some of the strategies that we all know make a difference.

**Dee Wallace (19:16)**

The field is so much about relationships and long-term engagements, in order for people to change attitudes in organizations, to change practices. It's so important for us to think about talent development for the field.

**Sheila Maguire (19:36)**

Yes.

**Dee Wallace (19:37)**

And along those lines, I've been calling you the Godfather of the Academy, in a good way. In a good way.

**Stephen Tucker (19:49)**

Thank you.

**Dee Wallace (19:51)**

In a good way. Because, like I mentioned, you started as a fellow, and you're alum of the National Academy. And through the years you've served as highly rated guest faculty for local academies in Cleveland and New Orleans and Jackson, Mississippi, Memphis, among others. And a couple of weeks ago, you even hosted at Northland the Buffalo Academy's final community event.

**Stephen Tucker (20:28)**

Yes.

**Dee Wallace (20:29)**

You have not a small job and not a small role in Buffalo to start with. How and why do you make time to serve in that way?

**Stephen Tucker (20:41)**

Because I really believe in developing the next generation of talent. I really believe in authentic leadership. I remember early on, before I was on this side of workforce development, when I was a program participant, I remember calling a person who was supposed to be my job developer, and she told me, "Hey, once you complete the program, give me a call. I'll give you some job leads." And I called so much, she started to ignore me. She didn't respond to my calls. When I would send emails, she never responded. And I remember how that felt, and I took away from that, if I ever got in the role of leadership, if I ever was in a position to help people or to create access to opportunity for people, I'm going to do it. And in my role now, and within the organization, we have a customer-centric approach and philosophy.

We return all phone calls. We return all emails. We try to assist where we can and do everything that we can to help others. One of our modus operandi is no excuses, just results. We really live by that, and I believe in that. And I feel that we have a responsibility not only to ensure our customers slash job seekers are prepared and ready to go to work and have access to career opportunities, but also our business partners as well. So I think that my giving back to the field definitely comes from my experience; that I had, good and bad, as a program participant, as well as now as a leader in this arena.

**Dee Wallace (22:42)**

And we are so grateful.

**Sheila Maguire (22:43)**

We are so grateful. And so are the fellows who've been inspired by you, Stephen. I'm really interested in what you think the field needs to pay attention to right now? If you were indeed the godfather of the entire workforce development field, and you could say, "This is what we need to do, get over yourselves. This is coming, this is what we think needs to happen here," what do you think we should be paying attention to? We have a big mandate. We have fabulous opportunities. But yeah...



**Stephen Tucker (23:31)**

There's a few things. I think people talk about collaboration all the time, but it's very rare that you see it, especially in workforce development. We all know that in the workforce development system, it could be isolated, it could be very siloed. There's competition within the system. There's people who are extremely competitive. But I think if I was the godfather of workforce development, the number one thing that I would advocate for is stronger collaboration, stronger partnerships. I would advocate for a customer-centric approach, meaning that our job seekers are our customers. They're not our clients, they're our customers receiving a service. So are our businesses. They are a customer that, if we're doing our job, we're providing them with a qualified workforce. But also philanthropy and government. They're our customers as well, because they make significant investments into the system. And when you're making an investment, you want to see a return. And return on that investment is people in good jobs, making great wages, leading to family sustainable lifestyles. So those will be some of the things I will focus on as well as telling our stories a little bit better.

We have to do a better job of telling our stories and quantifying our impact, because we are definitely having an impact. And here's an example: I mentioned that Northland Workforce Training Center received a capital investment of around \$65 million; \$59 million for the facility, \$6 million worth of equipment. We also received a \$5 million operating subsidy. The way we deliver our training, we basically have a very focused outreach and recruiting and awareness strategy to raise awareness of these opportunities, and we embed intense wraparound services with the delivery of technical training. Now, when you think about that investment, \$65 million, that's a lot of money. But since we've opened in 2018, we've enrolled more than a thousand individuals. We currently have a program completion rate of over 62%, which is double the national average for community colleges and triple the local average of the community college. We're placing 84% of our graduates in jobs with average salaries of around \$45,000 a year.

When you aggregate those salaries, that's over \$42 million added back into our local economy over the last five years. And with the multiplier, that's \$84 million. We need to tell that story, because we are definitely providing a positive return on investment in New York State. And other workforce development organizations are probably doing similar great work. We need to tell that story a little bit more.

**Sheila Maguire (26:32)**

Just a quick follow up on... I really appreciate the importance of that story and talking about collaboration and partnerships. What do you think we need to do differently to make that happen? We've been talking about silos and collaboration and integration, and it's certainly been a theme in all the academies in terms of ways to better work together. What would you do, assuming nothing in the way, but what would you do to actually invent that, to make that happen?

**Stephen Tucker (27:10)**

I think we have to show fellows examples of where it's working and the impact, because a lot of people, in my opinion, don't necessarily believe that it's working or that some of the workforce investments are having the impact that we're at. We need to show them that it's working, and we need to show them

how it's working. And we need to create champions and have those champions tell that story so that we can amplify this message and this work. Because it is working out. I know of great places that have very responsive workforce investment systems that are meeting the needs of employers, but the majority of the conversation is, the majority isn't. How do we highlight the ones that are working so that we can develop champions to amplify that work and then replicate those strategies where it makes sense?

**Sheila Maguire (28:01)**

Yeah, yeah, no, that makes a huge amount of sense. Thank you.

**Dee Wallace (28:06)**

Absolutely. Telling those stories, it's inspiring, as you are to us. As we bring this conversation to a close, I would ask about you, Stephen Tucker, as a leader, what's one thing that you would encourage other workforce development leaders to do in order to continually evolve in their work and their leadership?

**Stephen Tucker (28:38)**

I'm a proponent of lifelong learning. Also, I believe getting an understanding of how our work is having an impact in our region and being able to tell those different stories. That would be number one, that I elevate to the top. But also continue to develop professionally, continue to seek out partnerships. Personally, I love that. Do what you do best, partner for the rest. I know where my limitations are. I know where my areas of weaknesses are. It's okay to develop those weaknesses. It may be an even better strategy to partner with somebody who is stronger in those areas to amplify the work. So those are all strategies or recommendations that I would tell to other leaders, or share with other leaders.

**Dee Wallace (29:39)**

And we thank you for your leadership. We look forward to continuing to partner with you in the future and continuing to learn from you. And I know that your community is very grateful for the work that you're doing. And so on behalf of the Academy and the Workforce Leadership Network, thank you for our time together.

**Stephen Tucker (30:02)**

And thank you guys. I really appreciate it.

**Sheila Maguire (30:03)**

Thank you.