



Season 2 - Episode 7 “It’s All Relationship Building”

Welcome to the seventh episode of Season 2 of the NJFPA Stradley Ronon Food Forum Podcast. In this episode, [Nicole Stover](#), Employment Lawyer and Partner at [Stradley Ronon](#), speaks with [Melissa Eckstein](#), District Career Facilitator, [Gateway 2 Careers](#). They talk about relationship building, innovative partnerships and inspiring success stories.

Guest Bio:



Melissa is passionate about developing symbiotic relationships between education and workforce. Having cultivated partnerships with 150 businesses and counting, she has created career opportunities for students, as well as workforce development prospects for companies.

Melissa proudly serves as Vice-Chair for Mid Atlantic States Career & Education Center, Gloucester County Workforce Development Board, and on the NJFPA Education Committee.

Listeners will hear:

- The Gateway 2 Careers approach to career planning across 7th to 12th grades.
- What false stereotypes about workforce issues could be holding your company back.
- What key partner you need to find new talent and how to rethink your job postings.
- Strategies for long term talent retention and growth.
- Success stories from her students and companies doing it right.
- Shift your mindset to selling your company to gain a workforce.

Edited Interview Transcript

Nicole Stover 0:52

Welcome to the next episode of The Stradley Ronon New Jersey Food Processors Association food forum. Let me introduce myself. My name is Nicole Stover, and I'm an employment attorney with Stradley Ronon. A lot of my work focuses on the topic we're going to discuss today, which is the recruitment and retention of key employees, whether that's your entry level starting line worker, to your future leader, all the way up to your executives. And I'm thrilled to be joined today by Melissa Eckstein. She's a leader of the innovative gateway to Careers Program at Gateway Regional High School. Welcome, Melissa.

Melissa Eckstein 1:31

Thank you, Nicole, it's good to see you again.

Nicole Stover 1:34

Great to see you. Tell us a little more about yourself and the Gateway to Careers Program.

Melissa Eckstein 1:40

I'm a 26 year educator. I was an English teacher for 14 years, got a master's in Psych, did some counseling after that at the school, and then got certified for career counselor, which I love. It's a mix of everything that I do now. Essentially the Gateway 2 Careers philosophy, we're a seven to 12 district, which makes us really unique. The kids are trapped with us for six years, which is great because we really get to see the growth.

We can start career education in middle school, which is really when you should begin, you should start exposing students really young. I think a lot of people wait until they're juniors and seniors - oh, we better start thinking about what you want to do. That's just too late. We expect students to know what they want to do for the rest of their life with very little exposure or experience. So our school several years ago decided we needed to do something a little different.

Nicole Stover 2:32

Tell us a little bit more about the steps you take to prepare students to enter the workforce. You said it's a long period. So what's your first step all the way up to once they hit that junior and senior year.

Melissa Eckstein 2:44

We start basic with the exposure level, because you can't aspire to a career that you don't even know exists. Students are really good, they know front house people. They know doctors, they know attorneys, they know what a grocery store is, they know what a

chef is. But they don't know all the back of the house jobs, which is what organizations like the Food Processors would be. There's so many good opportunities for employment. We try to expose them specifically, mostly, to back of the house jobs that are not forefront in students minds. Unless they have a parent that works there, they wouldn't even know about it.

We start in seventh and eighth grade with taking them on field trips, we do Manufacturing Day, which also includes food processing. We take them to the plants so that they can see things and start to get an idea about it. That's in middle school. We also do have them do career interest personality surveys, we have them repeat them because they change over time. That's seventh and eighth grade, we do that. 10th grade, we're still doing exposure, we have them do the personality surveys and interest surveys again, we take them back out to companies.

Then in 10th and 11th grade, they can start to hone in and do some job shadowing, which means they'll go out for a few hours at a company and maybe job shadow someone. We do career days every year, they get to meet people, interview people about their jobs and try them out for a few hours. Then when they get to be juniors and seniors is when it becomes very independent. They pick a few things and they can do internships. Not every kid is ready for this at that point, just like not every kid reads at five, but the kids that are ready, we placed them out as close as we can to try out what they want to do. So they don't go to college and spend \$100,000 on a career that they don't even know if they really like because they've never tried it out. I mean, we spend more time picking our clothes than we do careers, right? I don't buy pants unless I try them on for sure.

Nicole Stover 3:23

It sounds like you really lay the foundation for entering the workforce. Obviously partnering with you or an organization like yours serves an immense public benefit. But also how to businesses that work with your organization also benefit in terms of getting the right entry level positions in the door.

Melissa Eckstein 4:51

Well, it's all relationship building. I think organizations enjoy working with our students, once they experience it. We've worked with 170 companies, and we're a small school. But because our program is unique, in that we don't have tracks our program is based on what students aspire to do. So we're always gaining new partnerships and staying fresh. We have partners that have been with us for a long time, like Rastelli's is one. And I think they enjoy working with the school. First, it's building their community service, we promote them, they promote us, it's building that relationship and trust. And it's just fun. I mean, we do fun events, the kids have a good time, the kids benefit from working with experienced older mentors at the company that have been there for a while. It's a fresh take,

it's always good when you get different generations together, they can both benefit. And it breaks down the stereotypes that exist in the media about kids are lazy, don't want to do this, or older people don't really enjoy working with younger people, or they don't understand each other. They actually have a lot in common. When you get down to it,

then both sides benefit.

Nicole Stover 6:31

So for an organization that maybe doesn't have you at the ready to feed entry level workers into their organization, how could a company today or in the next three weeks, start to position themselves to attract that type of talent out of the gate? I've talked to a lot of clients about recruiting, recruiting, recruiting, how do we get the right people in the door? So what have you seen that really appeals to the more entry level people that maybe some companies aren't thinking about? I know social media has been one big way that I've seen development in recruiting, but what have you seen, from your experience that really appeals to your students?

Melissa Eckstein 7:12

I would use the schools. I think a lot of people don't realize that in New Jersey, all public high schools have to have a career program. Education in general does not do a great job marketing that, because we don't have marketing departments. So it's going to take the companys reaching out to the schools. Then use the guidance counselors! The school counselors know the kids and they will be able to match up, hey, this kid would be a good fit for this company.

I know that everyone right now is completely strapped and I feel horrible for the workforce in general. They need people in seats, they need people in positions, and everyone's scrambling and doing more with less. But long term, it will be beneficial to them to grow the relationship with the counseling department in the high schools. They can start by saying, you know, I understand that you have a career program. I have a need in my company, and maybe we're down the street. How can we partner up? Do you have any students that I could interview that you would recommend?

We've done direct hires in June. We have had students that really didn't have a plan after high school, they needed to go to work. They were already working full time at maybe Dunkin Donuts or Chick fil A, but were looking for something with benefits. It's worked really well. We had a company come over. They needed some butchers, they were willing to train the students. They just needed good students. They used the school counselors who already knew the kids as a matchmaker, that's really what it is. So I know that people use other companies, a third party, it would be better to use a third party that has been with the kids for a while, that has been with the students, that knows them.

Nicole Stover 8:58

It hadn't occurred to me before. But just because someone's graduated, or is close to graduation, that doesn't mean you might not already have them on your speed dial and know that they might be a good fit. So if I'm a company looking for someone that is 20, you still might be a great resource because you might still have those connections and know who's still out there looking or who's maybe moving around. I think that's really interesting.

Melissa Eckstein 9:23

We do have those connections, absolutely. To be honest with you, I have parents coming to me that need help with resumes, that need job connections. Honestly, right now more than ever, it's not that people are lazy. It is not that people don't want to work. It is that people need help. Everyone's anxious, we've all been through hell quite honestly, this hasn't happened in 100 years. We're living through a world crisis and people just need a little support. They don't need to be supported for years. They need a little help getting on the yellow brick road. Some support, a pat on the back, you can do this, there's people that are willing to help you. Because I think, ultimately, we've all felt so isolated.

If companies could reach out and get connected, and do a little, hey, if you think you can do this, here's what we're willing to pay you, you can get benefits. Here's where you can go from there. Here's the job outlook, if you want to continue to train, you can also get this, almost like an apprenticeship model that unions do. And we do have relationships with unions too. Give somebody the long term, that's perfect for a lot of people, I would also encourage companies not to just look at schools that are affluent. I hear a lot that "kids don't want to work." There are some kids that don't want to work, they don't have to work. But my school is 40% free lunch. My kids are already working. They're helping some of their parents pay bills, they're living with grandparents. So they have a work ethic already. And it would be great for them to be in a more stable company or a company where they can grow a little more, because they already have the work ethic.

So I would encourage companies to not judge schools or kids quickly. But to get in there and assess when they're in there, if they want to build the relationship. Some of my best interns are not my best students in school. But when they get outside of school, they knock it out of the park. They're working 70-80 hours a week.

Nicole Stover 11:34

I've been seeing somewhat of an emerging trend is the idea of how you write your job description matters, right? Some jobs maybe just have a standard form, they just use the same one over and over. It always says something like, associate's degree required, or really focusing on hardline requirements that maybe not necessarily needed. You really don't need that degree to do the job very well, if you come in and are trained.

What other trends have you seen in terms of job descriptions, postings for jobs, or just the way that employers are marketing to the job market now that might have changed. I don't know if it's in response to the pandemic, or just maybe we've started to see some of the things you're seeing to try to bring people in the door that might be more non-traditional, or not have followed a set career - high school - college path.

Melissa Eckstein 12:27

I think that's great, what you just said. I think we have some antiquated ways or hard lines about what we think makes a great employee. I would challenge that any day of the week. I will tell you that one time we had a valedictorian, I wouldn't have placed him anywhere, because he was not trainable. He already thought he knew everything. He did not need to work, he had a lot of money. So here, you've got the "smartest" kid in the building, and I didn't even think he would have been a good intern. So I love what you said.

Rethink if it's a job that an 18 year old can do if they're trainable, and you can train them in house. Then you're really getting what you want. The other positive thing about 18 year olds, they really don't have family responsibilities yet. They can start to build their career early on. I think when the three of us were talking before this started about something that one of the companies, Rastelli did. "Now you're home" or one of their advertisements talked about being home, we need you on our team, we're looking for you. The Uncle Sam, we need you, we want you. I think people want now more than ever to feel like they're a part of something larger than themselves. They're just scared. So if we can bridge that gap and get them started, they usually do really well. And if they don't, they don't, this isn't the magic bullet. It's a multifaceted problem that we're facing in the workforce right now, for several reasons, including that we've had a lot of people pass away. We have people that are sick, we have people that have underlying conditions, we have people that are scared.

With a multifaceted problem, we have to use many approaches. One of them is how can we recruit these young people? Again, people that graduated in 2016, and they're still sitting in their parents house. I know graduates from college that are sitting in their parents house, they play video games, and they go to work. But they're working at jobs that are not going to have them grow. They just need a little help getting out of the house. Where do they go? Who do they see? Where are the good companies?

Nicole Stover 14:33

How does an employer bridge that gap? And you did talk about giving people a sense of purpose. I think that's the other thing we're seeing too. No matter what your company is, people want to see that. They want to have a greater purpose in their careers. You touched on this a little bit, the idea of when you bring someone in, showing them what the path to the future looks like, within your organization. Rather than they come in, they work on your line for six months and then they go somewhere else. What are some ways that an employer can do that, to show them that we are invested in you for the long term. If you meet these standards, there is a path here for you. Have you seen some of your member organizations doing that, to promote from within essentially?

Melissa Eckstein 15:14

Some companies do this really well. But I think every company, even small companies can benefit from this. Everyone needs goals, and we all need a little help no matter what age quite honestly. Diets, whatever it is, you need the next step. If I get here, you get the gold star. I know that sounds elementary, but we all want the gold star. You go to Weight Watchers, they're giving you a gold star after five pounds and they're having you stand up and talk about it. So I think companies need to do that. I know it sounds hokey, but it gives people that positive reinforcement. And positive reinforcement any day of the week works better than negative reinforcement. If we could be proactive with that, I think it keeps your employees happy, and your employees are the business. I don't care, I know robotics, and all that - your employees are the business. They just are. And if they're happier, there's all kinds of research about it, they're going to work harder. When they feel a part of something, they're going to be invested. When you feel that you're a part of something you feel invested. Again, it's not the magic bullet, but overall, that's going to be better for your company.

Kids need that, 18 year olds need that, 30 year olds need that. They need to see the end of the tunnel, they need to see the middle of the tunnel. How can I get to the middle? And then it'll be up to them, it'll be on them. Maybe they want to stay at entry level, maybe they're comfortable with that for a few years, or maybe you've got a go-getter that in six months, they want to get to the next step. Maybe there's monetary reasons, maybe they're running a house at 20 years old. I have kids that literally have no one and at 19-20 they're running the house. So they really are motivated to better themselves.

I'll tell you something else. Most of the kids these days, they're into community service much more so I think than my generation or previous generations. With everything going on in the world right now, they want to make it better. And there's that drive to do that. So if you're a company, and you can do a community service thing... Again, I know I put this in the guise of I know everyone is overwhelmed as it is, am I really going to do a community service activity? But I think companies that can squeeze even one in a year, and build that relationship. We're a team and now we're such a good team, we're going to go out and do something for the greater community as a team. That's just a feel good moment, you can't do anything better than to increase positivity among workers. Then they feel good about themselves, then they're making relationships with Ronald McDonald House, or American Red Cross. It's just all about getting out there as a team and showing that you're a team, solidified and that you're willing to help someone else.

Nicole Stover 18:09

Through the Food Processors Association, I've become connected with a lot of different folks on LinkedIn, which is a way that people connect from the business perspective. I do see actually a lot of the members really actively promoting their community service, but in really unique ways, which I always I just think is fascinating. I'm trying to think of some great examples. Hoffman's does a great job at this, if anyone wants to take a page out of their playbook and look at their LinkedIn, just really promoting their people. When you see those things, you start to think, oh, wow, these are organizations that really invest in their people long term and in our community. I think it gives you that greater sense of purpose.

Melissa Eckstein 18:50

And they look fun! I mean, you have got to look a little fun! And in any company, you can look fun. I have fun cleaning my house, I put the right music on. You can have fun doing anything and a company needs to look fun and you can look fun. We all don't have to walk around like, "oh god it's another work day. It sucks to be here. How are we going to get anybody to work here?" You have got to be a little fun. So Bill Hoffman runs around with his Bee. He's got the Bee all the time, the Bee shows up. I mean, it's fun. It makes you want to be there. It's a fun work environment. And they work hard and they work in bad conditions sometimes. I mean, he owns a pest service, but you want to work there. You know, be the Bee. He's very good at it.

So is Rastelli's. Rastelli's, I've taken kids on trips there. Those people are working in 40 degree temperatures all day long. In the manufacturing company - freezing - they're in there smiling! The people in charge, the administration's coming in, and they know the people's names in the plant. Somebody who's pretty high up in Rastelli's, knows the workers, they talk to them. They're having family outings for them, picnics every once in

a while on the property, that goes a long way for a company to do.

Nicole Stover 20:15

With Rastelli's, you had a couple of intern success stories there too. Where you really placed people and they actually got a real voice, even as an intern. We've spoken before and done presentations before, where you spoke about a marketing intern who took something just from an idea and it became reality.

Melissa Eckstein 20:34

And she's still there. She's graduating college, and she's still working for Rastelli in their marketing department. But early on, they gave her a chance. It's really about being open minded on either end, and my intern at the time, she did not want to go into the food business, nothing with food. Her parents owned a restaurant, she was done with food, "Ms. Ecks, I'm not doing that!" So I go well, you want to do marketing, and there's this really awesome company and they do stuff with QVC, and they're really innovative. I think you'll really enjoy it. So I said, Be open minded. Then all of a sudden, she's taking pictures of food on the plate, learning how to plate food and take pictures of it, working at Broad Street Run for Rastelli's. She did stuff with QVC, early on. She came back running into my office: "they took my idea for something and they're going to use it!" As an 18 year old, what great feedback.

What's great with that company is they did get a good idea, something that would appeal to a younger audience, which they were trying to capture from an 18 year old and they made her feel good at the same time. It was so symbiotic and perfect and she stayed. Again, she's going to college. She started in New York, but she works remotely with Rastelli and then she works during her breaks. She loves it and they love her. I've had a few interns there. They're just a great company.

As a company, it's important that you have the mindset of education for all of your employees. But respecting the educational process. That doesn't mean specifically schools, educational process happens. My whole job is taking kids out of school, the education process happens on the road, teach them how to use the trains, it's sensory education. You need to be in the business to really absorb because you're learning so many different ways. I think we take that for granted when you're in an environment. That's why I want people to get back to work. You're absorbing the learning, sensory. It's not just on a zoom, or visually or auditory. You're learning things in the environment, taste, hear, smell, touch, all that stuff. She learned so much with Rastelli's.

I'm so grateful to companies like that, that just are open minded. Yep, we'll take a student, we'll mentor them, we'll see what they got. If they've got something great, we'll keep them and we'll hire them. That's organically growing your own workforce before they're somewhere else for 15-20 years and they get set on things. They're growing their own workforce. Bill Huffman told me - he was just here speaking to my students right off of a red eye here, you've got this guy that's super powerful. But he grew up right around the corner from my school in Deptford. He came right off a red eye doing this big presentation in California and came and talked to my interns, my 20 interns. He was fabulous, hadn't had a night's sleep. But that idea of I have a responsibility to share what

I've learned, because I am successful and give back. It just serves him very well. He says he hires people that are great before he has positions. I mean, what forward thinking is that? He's like, if I find somebody good, I hire him, I'll make a position for him. Because I know, great people are hard to come by. So if I find one, I'm going to grab them proactively, and we will find the right spot for them.

Nicole Stover 23:52

Now, that's a creative tip. I think you've probably sold all of our listeners now on getting involved with their high school. I love this idea of organically growing your employees into future leaders. How does someone get involved with their local high school? I know you mentioned that everybody has a career program, but how do I make the first call? Who do I call? Who shouldn't I call to start getting involved?

Melissa Eckstein 24:19

Well, I think the school counseling office is the place to go. Because they know the kids. They know the kids, they know the families, they might even know some parents that need jobs. The school counseling offices are the hub of the community. They just are in the know and you want the people that are in the know. Companies need to look at it, as they sell their product, go sell their company to the school. Hey, I've got this great company. It's right down the road from your school. How can we work together? Let's make this connection. It's good for the kids. It's good for the greater community. It's good for my company. Let's develop a pipeline. I need kids that do this. Because we've actually changed our curriculum, because of companies that we've met that have needed workforce. We've grown elective courses.

Grow an elective course in high school. I know they're doing a little bit of this in community college, grow an elective course here. We now have a healthcare class because we make connections and I have kids doing CNAs now. We have an Aviation Club now, because we're 20 minutes from Philadelphia Airport, and they need aviators. So if you go to a high school and say, Hey, how can we develop a pipeline? Can we build an elective class? Can you instill these kinds of things in the kids before they graduate, because that would be useful to my company? I think you're going to have a lot of high schools. If you look at it, as you're selling your company to the school, to gain a workforce, that's a different mindset.

What happens now, and what people have told me now is they'll send an email, and they don't get a response. Or they make a phone call, and they don't get a response. Everyone knows if you've ever had to call Comcast or anything else, it's who you get on the phone. That's the game changer. If you get the wrong person on the phone, if you get a new person on the phone, if you get somebody that's overwhelmed on the phone, then it's game over, you just have to try again. But the relationships are important. It's not even just important just to the businesses and to the schools. It's really important to our community. Everyone wants to be a part of something, and we need to make it happen for multiple reasons. But workforce is number one.

Nicole Stover 26:31

Melissa, those are great ideas. I especially love the idea of think of it as you're selling your business to the school to create that pipeline. In some of these jobs, for instance, you mentioned CNAs, some of these jobs are really hard to come by jobs. There's a lot of fierce competition. It seems like probably for the cost of a phone call, and maybe a meeting, you might be opening up a whole new pipeline that you didn't have before from just posting something online. That's a really creative way to go about it. And it doesn't sound like it's way out of anyone's scope of day, we talked about doing more with less. So I think that's a great idea.

Then just speaking of our community, we're all part of the New Jersey Food Processors Association. What benefit do you see to the Association? And how can we all work together to try to help each other in these very challenging times, especially with regard to employees and recruiting and retention?

Melissa Eckstein 27:26

I think sharing what has worked with other people, having the people that are having some success getting workforce, what do they do? What's their number one or two thing that they think is successful in recruiting and retaining people? I think the sharing is really important because it's name with a face, it's real stuff. The problem with social media and emails is that I've heard people say I did this really good ad, nobody responded. It's actually too much. We're inundated. We're inundated. So the thing that makes the difference is the in-person. If there's in-person sharing amongst companies at events, maybe what worked for you what's your success story, then that's something someone can go home and actually implement.

I think the in-person is the key. I know that's antiquated. Everyone's to do stuff, not in person. But that is the difference. I've had companies tell me no, right off the bat. We don't take high school interns. I show up. It's much harder to say no to somebody, when you're looking at their face, rather than through an email and on the phone.

I will also tell you that if you email schools, we have firewalls that you would not believe. So if a company emails a school for the first time it doesn't even get to the person. Our technology guy? I'm always in trouble. They just lock stuff down! I can't get a hold of this company. Would you let loose the reins a little bit? So I know there's assumptions that we've done these great ads, we've made these contacts by phone or by email. You got to go in person. I know we were in a pandemic, but we have to get back there at some point.

My kids have gone everywhere. If we need to be vaxed and masked, we go. We take the vaxed and masked and that's where we go. But we have to do that. So I just think in person sharing is a big thing.

I love hearing success stories. I love when companies share it. When Bill told me he hires people, picks them up off the street, if you find somebody great. He's like, hey, I want this person on my team and we will find a spot for them. Because if they're trainable, and they are nice, and they have some soft skills, I can teach them to do anything. If you zoom out, that's the ballgame, right? They can always continue to go to school, they can always continue to train. But if you get them in your building, and you make them feel like they're family, and they're important, they'll do anything for you.

Nicole Stover 29:49

On that note, we started off talking about connections, and I think this is where we round out our conversation. You've really emphasized that and brought that home for all of us, that really focusing on these connections. At the end of the day, that's what we're talking about, right? Different ways to connect with people. It's been challenging. But we're all getting back there and I really appreciate all of your insights. And thank you for joining us today.

Melissa Eckstein 30:14

Thank you, Nicole, I hope we get to work together again.

Nicole Stover 30:17

You know, Melissa, I think a lot of our listeners are going to want to continue this conversation with you. When is our next chance to do that?

Melissa Eckstein 30:23

Well, we [NJFPA] have a big annual conference coming up. And it's actually in Atlantic City, which is fabulous at Harrah's on March 18. And we're going to have a panel there talking about workforce and attracting workforce, retaining workforce. Hopefully, I'm going to be able to get a mentor there and a mentee there so that they can give you their perspectives on things that worked for them. What enticed them to do this, and what was the success story of it. So I'm really looking forward to it. I hope you're going to be there Nicole. Going to go down there Thursday night, pregame the conference for Friday, and it's going to be a good time

Nicole Stover 30:59

Speaking of connection, we all have a chance to get together in person and soon. So looking forward to it.

Melissa Eckstein 31:03

Yes, thank you. Good to see you Nicole.

On behalf of the New Jersey Food Processors Association. We thank you for listening to this episode of the NJFPA Food Forum. For more information, you can visit us at www.njfoodprocessors.org. If you have an idea for a future episode, please email us at help@njfoodprocessors.org. We would love to connect with you and make your story and your experience part of this series too.

