



## Listening to the Workforce Market with ACT's Jenna Cohen

### Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 301

Jenna Cohen (00:00):

I think that it's okay to change your mind when presented with new compelling data, which is something that I think that a lot of our society has struggled with, that they make their mind up, and that's their opinion, and that's their stance. And I think that one of the real successes and the piece of advice that I would give folks in the education and the workforce market is follow the data, listen to the market, and use that to drive your decisions. And if the data's different than when you originally took your stance or had an opinion, use that to shape your new one.

Celisa Steele (00:39):

I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb (00:40):

I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb (00:49):

Welcome to episode 301, which features a conversation with Jenna Cohen, workforce product manager at ACT. We're guessing most listeners are familiar with ACT the college entrance exam, but ACT the organization is deeply invested in workplace success, which is the focus of this conversation. Jenna's interest in answering the question, "Why are so many students not prepared for the workforce?" has shaped her career and brought her to ACT in July 2021.

Jeff Cobb (01:21):

Jenna and Celisa talk about ACT's WorkKeys products, its National Career Readiness Certificate, and its Work Ready Communities program. Jenna emphasizes the necessity of listening to the market and the need to use data and research to truly understand market needs and solve real problems—a good idea for all learning businesses. Jenna cautions against relying on outdated data, pointing to the pandemic as an example of how quickly things can change. She also points to listening and relationship-building as critical ingredients in good partnerships with employers. Celisa and Jenna spoke in April 2022.

Celisa Steele (02:06):

So would you tell us a little bit about ACT and your role there?

Jenna Cohen (02:11):

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available at [www.leadinglearning.com/episode301](http://www.leadinglearning.com/episode301).*

Absolutely. I am the workforce product manager, and what that means is I oversee all of the visioning work, the product improvements, the day-to-day, everything from creation inside from our content team to externally facing how workforces, businesses, community colleges, and even the K-12 market use our assessments in workforce, as well as our curriculum.

Jenna Cohen (02:37):

A little bit about ACT. ACT is a mission-driven nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people achieve education and workplace success. And I think it's really important to share a little bit about our North Star. We exist to fight for fairness and education and create a world where everyone can discover and fulfill their potential. And, most importantly, our mission is helping people achieve education and, for this audience especially, workforce success.

Celisa Steele (03:05):

And I definitely want to come back to that North Star. I know I have at least one question I know I want to get to, but—

Jenna Cohen (03:10):

Absolutely.

Celisa Steele (03:11):

I think, to start off, I just want to talk a little bit about some of the things that I know that ACT's doing. I tend to associate ACT with that college entrance exam, but I know that ACT the organization does much more. And, in particular, I was curious about WorkKeys and then the National Career Readiness Certificate. So would you tell us a little bit about those and maybe what prompted ACT to create those assessments and the certificate?

Jenna Cohen (03:41):

Yeah, absolutely. So a lot of us educators like myself and hopefully some listeners know a lot about college and career readiness standards, and, when you hear the ACT, that really rings the bell of college readiness. Where WorkKeys and the NCRC comes into play is around that career readiness mindset. So think about students and individuals who are seeking jobs, individuals who are already in jobs, and individuals who may be looking for a change. They're looking to their readiness in that foundational level of workforce skills.

Jenna Cohen (04:16):

So our NCRC is made up of three assessments: Graphic Literacy, Applied Mathematics, and Workplace Documents. Each assessment is about 55 minutes in length, and you can earn a Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum. Each of those levels are associated with skills. And soon we hope to be able to share information around some digital badging that we're doing with the NCRC.

Jenna Cohen (04:43):

The other part of your question is, "What made ACT think about this is?" I kicked us off with sharing information around how the ACT really speaks to that college readiness model. And we know that a component of success isn't just going to that four-year institution and getting a degree because that doesn't always lead to a job, and it doesn't always mean that you are ready and have those foundational skills it takes to be successful in the workplace, those job-readiness

skills. So ACT's created the NCRC, these three assessments that really give information on if a student, if an examinee—you'll hear me refer to the student as an examinee—is prepared for those foundational skills. And again, that's around Graphic Literacy, Applied Mathematics, and Workplace Documents. In addition to these assessments, we have five others, and we also offer curriculum that can help a student prepare for these assessments and prepare for being ready in the workplace.

Celisa Steele (05:45):

So I'm assuming that there are a lot of competencies that underlie WorkKeys and those assessments that you've been talking about. And it would seem to me that establishing and maintaining those competencies would be a lot of work. So could you just talk a little bit about how ACT approaches that?

Jenna Cohen (06:03):

Absolutely. So once you earn an NCRC, you have that NCRC for life. So, if you take the NCRC for the first time, those three assessments, and you earn the Bronze, you are always a holder of that Bronze assessment. Now you can retest as many times as you'd like. So you retest again, and this time you get a Gold, and you want to keep retesting until you get the Platinum. You're able to do that with the NCRC. We tie our NCRC. We connect with a lot of employers. This is often done through our Work Ready Communities, and oftentimes the different levels of the NCRC will be tied to different jobs available with some of our workplace partners. So, you might see the Bronze level as that entry-level position, where you're just starting out, you have the minimum skills to be able to do that entry-level position, or you might see that Platinum tied to a higher level within the organization that could offer more benefits, more pay, depending on what the employer needs.

Celisa Steele (07:02):

And so you brought it up there, the fact that you work with employers to try and set some of these competencies. How do you go about that work, and how do employers help shape and inform the workforce development offerings that you put out there?

Jenna Cohen (07:17):

Absolutely, that's a great question. So ACT does job profiling, where we have our group of industrial organizational psychologists, our research team, work with the employers to really define what the skills are that are needed for that career readiness, that job readiness, and information with the different employers. And oftentimes we will, after the profiling is complete, we will recommend NCRC. These three assessments are a really good fit. However—or in addition to, rather—the WorkKeys Business Writing assessment is something that would be really beneficial for your workplace as well. We may also recommend using some curriculum that we offer around the WorkKeys and thinking about you can triangulate the different services and the specimens and products that we have in workforce to really meet the organizational needs and solve the problems that we're trying to solve. Being a problem-solver is a really important component of working at ACT.

Jeff Cobb (08:21):

We're grateful to BenchPrep for sponsoring the Leading Learning Podcast. BenchPrep is an award-winning learning platform purpose-built to help learners feel confident and prepared to take difficult entrance, certification, and licensing tests by delivering an intuitive, efficient, and

engaging study experience. BenchPrep helps you accelerate test prep revenue growth by offering the tools you need to create market-ready products and data to improve your content and understand learner behavior.

Jeff Cobb (08:49):

Many of the world's leading associations, credentialing bodies, test providers, and training companies trust BenchPrep to power their online study programs, including ACT, the Association of American Medical Colleges, CFA Institute, CompTIA, GMAC, McGraw-Hill Education, AccessLex, and more. More than 8 million learners have used BenchPrep to attain academic and professional success. To discover more, visit [leadinglearning.com/benchprep](http://leadinglearning.com/benchprep). Now, back to Jenna and Celisa.

Celisa Steele (09:25):

Do you have any thoughts on the secret ingredient or ingredients that go into working well with employers?

Jenna Cohen (09:32):

Yeah, I think, with anything, you have to be a good listener. You have to be able to kind of peel that onion back. If you can't tell, I was watching *Shrek* this weekend with my little one. And so being able to peel that onion back and really understand the different layers and not necessarily the problem. You might get a blanket statement of, "I'm having problems recruiting and retaining employees." You might hear that from an employer. So it's really peeling that problem statement back and understanding what the needs are, and, of course, making sure that ACT is a good fit with our WorkKeys products or possibly connecting you with some of our partners, and being a true problem-solver, listening to what those areas of need are, and not just putting a blanket product or service over top of it, but really digging in deep to be that problem-solver and that thought partner with the organizations we work with.

Celisa Steele (10:29):

Great. I do think that listening is always so important, and listening tends to take time. And that, I think, that can always, to some extent, be a barrier in really having those effective partnerships, just because of the sheer investment in time that it takes.

Jenna Cohen (10:45):

Yeah, I think that the other secret ingredient, probably just as important, is relationship-building—getting to know one another and being able to know when you're getting that blanket problem statement versus when you're really getting in deep to see what those levers of change are.

Celisa Steele (11:01):

So I'm curious if you are seeing the role of credentials change as the global economy and the nature of work have evolved. Are there any recent shifts or trends that you want to call out for listeners?

Jenna Cohen (11:16):

Yeah, we're having a lot of conversations internally about this. We do have a credentialing department that is working very closely with the WorkKeys products, and we're digging in to

see what are these market trends and where do we need to lean in to help solve different problems. And what we have found is that it's really state by state, county by county that are leaning into the credentialing world. And we're seeing the number growing. And so we're thinking about what are the different skills that are attached to the NCRC, the Bronze, Silver, Gold, and Platinum, and how do those skills possibly equate into different credentials? What can we do to have some of our research-based, field-tested data and information to help build off of this program?

Jenna Cohen (12:07):

So we are having a lot of internal conversations there. First and foremost, ACT, we're a research company. So we are gathering data, we're getting the facts, and we're ensuring that, should we have an additional offering or a follow-up offering or even a new product idea—which is music to my ears as a product manager—that it really meets the market needs. And customer voice and that market research data is a really big part of our work.

Celisa Steele (12:34):

In terms of trends or shifts, I was wondering if you wanted to say anything about microcredentials or stackable credentials. I know you mentioned digital badges coming to perhaps play a role around WorkKeys. So any thoughts there around those sorts of trends?

Jenna Cohen (12:54):

Yeah, I think that in this COVID world—or next phase of COVID, do I even dare say—that we're living in that we're seeing a lot of unique opportunities come out of the market. And one of them that I'm seeing more and more of is that four-year degrees aren't the bee's knees—and I'm not throwing any shade. I think that education is very important. Education is what makes our lives rich. But I think that folks are learning that some of these stackable credentials, some of these microskills, some of these different, alternative means of showing what you can do and maybe where you have room for growth are really valuable to employers. They say, "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." And so these credentials do a really nice job at showing what are the specific skills, what are the specific components that I need for a new employee to do, and how can I use these to prove that and to leverage it to help build my organization?

Celisa Steele (14:04):

How has COVID impacted the work that ACT does, and the work of those that you serve as well?

Jenna Cohen (14:11):

Yeah. We talk about this a lot. Who would have thought five years ago that this would be something that we were having to solve for? And I think it's touched all of our lives, for sure, but I think that, based on different factors, it's impacted us differently. So I'm going to focus on the business world, the workforce, because I think that probably is best for the audience here. Thinking about access and equity and availability of jobs and then over-availability, not being able to fill the jobs, we have found that test centers that used to offer our assessments are still working on opening up. And one component, the loneliness of COVID, of people being remote and people not being in-person is something that's sticking around to stay.

Jenna Cohen (15:01):

We're currently in a proof of concept to understand what are the risks and benefits of offering some type of remote proctoring. So that would mean that you would be able to take one of the WorkKeys assessments from a remote location, may that location be home or be in your office, but not have to go to one of our test centers with a proctor in person, rather the proctor would be on your computer virtually. And so that's one way that we're trying to address the remoteness that's going to stick around. I was reading, I think it was *Forbes*, and they did a survey, and one of the things that's coming out of the pandemic is this concept of remoteness. People have gotten very used to working from home, working where they want, working different odd hours, and they're able to get the job done.

Jenna Cohen (15:51):

And so, as people are heading back into the office and the workforce is jump-starting, from what we're hearing, remoteness is starting to be a benefit that's now offered as a part of a package. So, whereas organizations used to spend hundreds and thousands of dollars on rent to provide office space, that a lot of times they're utilizing the WeWorks of the world, group workspaces, or allowing employees as a benefit to work from home one, two, three, four, five days a week, in some of these. And so, as always at ACT, we are listening to the market, hearing what employers are offering to be able to tack on and ride the coattails of that benefit offering. That's why we're thinking about the different features and plugins that we can do to continue to modernize our products to meet the market needs.

Celisa Steele (16:49):

And so, in your response there, I was hearing too, it sounds like at this point remote proctoring is not an option for those WorkKeys assessments. So it's something you're working to?

Jenna Cohen (16:59):

Yeah, that's correct. So we have, anytime we offer anything that could be potential risk around test security or item harvesting or anything like that, we have to go through many different processes to ensure—because this is considered to be a standardized assessment, and the scores are used nationwide, we need to make sure that everything's secure. So we're working with our test security groups. We're working with all of the stakeholders. That's essentially what the product manager does. We engage all of the stakeholders, from research to content to test security to operation to our enterprise solutions, and we bring everyone to the table and the market. The market was the voice that led us to explore this opportunity, and we're making good progress. I don't have any clear updates to offer at this time, but I can say we're making some good progress, and I'm really hopeful that we'll continue to do so.

Celisa Steele (17:55):

So when you think about the adjustments that ACT has made during the pandemic, are there ones that you think will stick around and be lasting post-pandemic?

Jenna Cohen (18:08):

Yeah, I think anything around convenience and flexibility—all are in the name of modernization—is going to be something that sticks around. We're hearing employers flex and bend and pivot to do that. And I think ACT WorkKeys, we're going to have to continue to follow suit to be a good partner.

Celisa Steele (18:27):



You mentioned it, and I know from doing a little bit of research and reading up prior to our conversation, that ACT is really committed to fighting for fairness in education and creating this world where everyone can discover and fulfill their potential. So how does ACT see its role in diversity, equity, and inclusion, and what is ACT doing in that realm?

Jenna Cohen (18:53):

Yeah, that's a great question. Thank you so much for bringing that to the table to give me an opportunity to speak to. First and foremost, equity guides in all that we do. We are always conducting robust research on urgent challenges in education. A really good example of that in the workforce space, ACT, we engage local states and national leaders who are as passionate about reinventing the systems that empower everyone to compete and succeed and thrive. For example, last year, a decade after a tornado destroyed nearly one third of the city of Joplin, we celebrated Missouri's 89-percent participation in Work Ready Communities, with 102 of the 114 counties in the state participating. More than 5,300 employers in the state support Work Ready Communities and residents. And they have earned nearly 142,000 ACT career-readiness certificates—so that's the NCRC. And so it has demonstrated a strong talent pipeline for future growth.

Celisa Steele (20:02):

What lessons learned or advice do you have from your own experience that you would share with other organizations in the business of continuing education, professional development, lifelong learning?

Jenna Cohen (20:16):

Yeah, I think that that last one you hit on is so important. Usually in my introduction, I say I'm a lifelong learner first and foremost. I think that, no matter how far you are along in your career or how early you are in your career, you need to understand that the market always changes, and you have to be flexible. The only thing constant in life is change, and you have to be really ready to pivot and to open those ears to listen and be ready to learn. I think that it's okay to change your mind when presented with new compelling data, which is something that I think that a lot of our society has struggled with, that they make their mind up, and that's their opinion, and that's their stance. And I think that one of the real successes and the piece of advice that I would give folks in the education and the workforce market is follow the data, listen to the market, and use that to drive your decisions.

Jenna Cohen (21:09):

And if the data's different than when you originally took your stance or had an opinion, use that to shape your new one. And it doesn't mean that you have to go from one side of the fence to the other, but maybe you're somewhere in the middle because the data is so important in helping ensure that you're meeting the true need and that you're not solving a problem that doesn't exist anymore. I see so many colleagues and so many other organizations that are not solving the right problems anymore. When COVID hit, none of us were prepared. We didn't know—we still really don't know exactly what's coming in the future. We can be hopeful, and we can use the data at hand. I said at some point that I think we're in the next phase of this, but a new variant or something unknown could come across, and we could be in a different situation. And you have to be ready to act, not ready to provide a baked solution because you don't have the data to provide a baked solution.

Jenna Cohen (22:10):

And I get really weary of organizations that approach me, “Oh, we have this cutting-edge solution to solve all of your pandemic needs.” And I’m like, “We’re still navigating through this. What data did you use? How did you collect it? What was your sample size?” So the other piece of advice that I offer is be inquisitive. Be a lifelong learner. Be ready to pivot, to change, and be inquisitive. To me those three components will really ensure that you’re solving the actual problems and not problems that have already passed and may still be there or may not matter anymore.

Celisa Steele (22:48):

Is there any else that comes to mind that we haven’t had a chance to talk about yet?

Jenna Cohen (22:53):

We’ve touched on this a little bit, but I’d really like to just reemphasize just how important it is to understand just how complex the workforce ecosystem is. When you think about who our target audience is—I think you’ve heard me call them students, learners, and examinees all throughout the length of this interview—and it really differs, who your buyer is, who your audience is. And knowing that we often have to work through large generational gaps and folks that are coming through very different levels, some high, some low, and that just establishing these work-ready, these career-readiness skills is a really great starting spot. It can really help fill those entry-level positions and throughout your organization.

Jenna Cohen (23:42):

And I also think that as we also focus on the complex ecosystem, that we really focus on how valuable the Work Ready Communities are, having ACT. Our profilers partner with the businesses and use the ACT products and services, understanding that we work with local and state and national leaders who are all passionate about growing the workforce and providing tools and resources for a robust economy. That triangulation, it’s really magical. And it creates such opportunity in the pipeline. It’s really, when it works, and everybody’s on board, and all hands in, we see just magic happening.

Jeff Cobb (24:30):

Jenna Cohen is the workforce product manager at ACT. We encourage you to learn more about the ACT Work Ready Communities program Jenna mentioned in the conversation. You can find links to that and the ACT Web site in the show notes for this episode at [leadinglearning.com/episode301](http://leadinglearning.com/episode301).

Celisa Steele (24:46):

At [leadinglearning.com/episode301](http://leadinglearning.com/episode301), you’ll find links to connect with ACT on various social media platforms and to connect with Jenna on LinkedIn.

Jeff Cobb (24:59):

In the show notes, you’ll also see options for subscribing to the podcast, and we’d be grateful if you would subscribe, if you haven’t yet, as subscriptions give us some data on the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele (25:10):

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Jeff Cobb (25:29):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. At [leadinglearning.com/episode301](http://leadinglearning.com/episode301), there are links to find Leading Learning on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele (25:40):

Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

*[music for this episode by DanoSongs, [www.danosongs.com](http://www.danosongs.com)]*