

# A Conversation with Riipen's

## Dana Stephenson and Karen Bakker



This interview is part of a series that explores work-based learning and seeks to broaden the ecosystem of quality postsecondary education for today's learners. ACE is grateful to the Joyce Foundation for its generous investment in this work.



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# Introduction

Riipen is an experiential-learning marketplace that is focused on closing the skills gap for learners through real-world experience. Riipen's learners work on a wide range of projects—nearly all of which are team-based—and specific project areas are driven by learners' academic requirements. Through their participation in course-related projects or virtual internship opportunities, learners receive feedback from real companies to add to their portfolio. Riipen facilitates connections between employers and educators who build real business challenges directly into classes for students to resolve. Learners also have access to guides through Riipen Academy.

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*This interview with Dana Stephenson, co-founder and chief executive officer, and Karen Bakker, vice president for strategy at Riipen, was edited for length and clarity.*

## Please share how you became a part of this company.

**Dana Stephenson:** A professor [at the University of Victoria] gave us students the opportunity for an industry-sponsored project. . . . Engagement levels skyrocketed. . . . [and] every student had access—the inclusivity overcoming typical barriers to co-op, internships, and full-time employment postgraduation. Employers who participated could recruit students right out of that class. The biggest barrier to this type of experiential learning was the capacity, the connections, and the time educators need to connect their course with work experiences. What if we could create a technology platform that would remove those barriers . . . ?

**Karen Bakker:** Riipen is one of the few platforms that bridges those siloed functions. Faculty are not only supported to do work-based learning . . . but just the existence of the Riipen platform allows a generation of faculty in a range of disciplines to imagine work-based projects. Any course or topic is amenable to having work-based experiences with real employers.

## How does Riipen think about the integration of learn and earn? How has that evolved?

**Stephenson:** Receiving an education or training without the opportunity to apply that in a real-world setting is a missed opportunity. . . . Our focus is to ensure that each student has an authentic engagement with an employer . . . [and makes] a professional connection. The education is being demonstrated in a project or an experience that will be evaluated by an industry representative . . . . So, the learner is getting the academic credentialing and the external validation from an employer who is hiring and has these talent needs.

## When you first launched in 2012, what were the challenges?

**Stephenson:** We couldn't be too prescriptive. We had to make sure that an educator could design and customize how they wanted to run the program . . . . [and then] their work became a template for another educator to use. We made a decision from day one that any content posted to our system from an educator or industry partner is an open-shared educational resource. Anyone can duplicate it, adapt it, or use it.

## Does a faculty member's degree of industry experience affect their openness to work-based projects?

**Stephenson:** Often, the early adaptors of work-based projects in new areas of study are those with industry experience. They get templates built, they get feedback, [and] the templates get revised. . . . [and] sent to new educators who might not have experience. Resources and best practices get shared, and connections among educators are built. The ecosystem grows organically that way.

## Are there particular academic areas that work best or where you expect to see greater expansion?

**Bakker:** The case-based disciplines . . . will be more easily amenable to something like Riipen. Instead of an off-the-shelf case study derived from a textbook, the faculty member slots a live case study into the syllabus. Where we see another entry point is with disciplines using community or service learning . . . . The Riipen platform is equally able to support those kinds of projects. . . . [and] can enable learners from all backgrounds to engage—but especially those from the arts and humanities—because for those students, it's less obvious how to bridge to the world of work.

## How does the work of Riipen fit with the bigger macroeconomic picture?

**Bakker:** We live in an era of record-low unemployment—where most employers are complaining about how hard it is to find staff. Layered on top is the need for an inclusive post-pandemic economic recovery. . . . there’s a mismatch between the skills students can articulate they’ve acquired and the skills employers are looking for. . . . One way to address this problem is to create large-scale local ecosystems whereby many internships are happening . . . when employers actually engage with learners and see what they can do, they’re much more likely to hire. It’s kind of a try-before-you-buy approach—where you’re not looking at transcripts or the branding of the school but what students are actually capable of. But such systems are also a power mechanism for information to flow much more comprehensively and rapidly . . .

## How might that innovation occur?

**Bakker:** [Institutions using Riipen] have a sense of what employers engaging with their school need in the labor market. The skills that employers are looking for are an early warning signal for the needs of the regional economy. Employers can work with curriculum designers and faculty to ensure that students are getting the skills employers need. This information flow creates a virtuous cycle—a more functional articulation between higher education and employers at a regional scale.

## How are institutions integrating work-based learning at an institutional level?

**Stephenson:** Experiential learning is moving under the provost’s office and is collaborating closely with teaching and learning. . . . Leadership needs to demonstrate how these work-based projects are a learning and career development opportunity for faculty. Also, leadership should offer incentives and recognition . . .

## What incentivizes employers to participate in Riipen?

**Stephenson:** We focus on engaging small to medium businesses, rural organizations, start-ups, and nonprofits. They’re actually more interested in the job to be done—the project completed—more than the recruitment side—diversifying the talent. Even if that employer doesn’t hire the student, the student can leverage that experience to get another job. . . . [and] many employers are realizing that they can use the partnership for recruitment and to diversify the talent pipe-

line. . . . If we start to get more of the larger players partnering in work-based learning from a recruitment perspective, the success will encourage more businesses of all sizes to engage. We are starting to see a shift away from credentials to skills-based recruitment.

## Many institutions haven’t yet developed a culture of measuring outcomes. What is your reaction to that status quo?

**Stephenson:** What we’ve seen to be really successful is using funding as the carrot. We have often arranged . . . institutions with a funding partner who wants to support a project for one to two years and help . . . build the capacity to continue long-term. We are building a community of practice and running a study. If an institution is going to get the money, then it has to agree to do the study and assess results in the same way.

## In such studies, what are you actually assessing?

**Bakker:** The quantitative variables have to do with the hard skills and soft skills improvement. The qualitative variables have to do with things like internal versus external locus of control, social capital, and the degree to which learners not only know that they have an expanded network of employers but also realize their sense of agency as to how they activate that network to find a job. . . . Employability includes a level of confidence.

## Have you seen Riipen have an impact on any specific populations?

**Stephenson:** Learners from underserved communities are more likely to underrate their own skills. . . . Communities that have been historically marginalized, like Indigenous communities, often have compounding layers of exclusion, like remote and rural. When you have this intersectional marginalization, the labor market is not a level playing field. But that is where we see some remarkable success stories.

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## Riipen Program Overview

Riipen is the world’s largest online work-based experiential learning marketplace. Project areas are driven by academic requirements. Riipen is different than an internship platform in that students’ work is project-based, nearly all projects are virtual, and the work is usually part of an academic program.

