

Ryan Wolber - PodCAST Transcript

Episode description:

On this episode of the PodCAST, we sit down with Ryan Wolber. Ryan is an alum of the Department of Technology and currently serves as a senior manager at EDF renewables.

Hear Ryan describe navigating a double major, managing busy extracurriculars, and the importance of maintaining connections. Ryan advocates for leading by example.

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### **Kara:**

Hello and welcome to the podcast, a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host, Kara Snyder, and I serve as the assistant dean of marketing communications and constituent relations for the College. Each episode, we're sitting down with an alum of the college, and today, we have a chance to talk to Ryan Wolber. Ryan is an alum of the Department of Technology and currently serves as a senior manager at EDF renewables. Welcome and thank you for being here.

### **Ryan:**

Thank you for having me. Well, Ryan, let's start at the beginning.

Unknown Speaker 0:33

Why did you choose ISU,

### **Ryan:**

Yeah, good question. So when I was in high school, I knew I wanted to work in the environmental sciences field, or I wanted to have a positive impact on our natural environment. Both my parents were high school science teachers, and so I was very lucky to spend a lot of time in the summers, camping and being outdoors and hiking with family and going out west. And so I really wanted to have a positive impact on the environment. And I saw that ISU had a new degree at that time. I actually read it in a newspaper back in a way, learned about the new degree

in renewable energy, and thought it was very interesting. And came and check out the campus, and probably fell in love with the quad and just is a large campus, but had a kind of a small, personal feel, which I which I appreciated. And, yeah, that's those are kind of the main reasons why I decided to go to ISU. Was the campus, the program and the people that I met.

**Kara:**

And once you got here, you ended up having a dual major. How did you make that decision?

**Ryan:**

Actually, pretty, pretty easy. I started off with renewable energy, and back at that time, it was just a renewable energy degree, I believe it's now called sustainable and renewable energy. But back then, there were two tracks. You could do a policy economics track, or you could do a kind of a technical track. And actually, by taking all the courses in the required Economics and Policy track, I one day saw in the Student Handbook that I was, I believe, three classes away or four classes away from second major in economics. So I figured, why not? And did a summer, a summer program, and I got the degree in the double degree in economics.

**Kara:**

I think that's a really smart way to take advantage of the track you were on and make the most out of your situation. And tell us then between your dual major and your involvement on campus, your time management skills must have been really critical. So what advice would you have for a student, dual major or not, that might be struggling with that time management concept?

**Ryan:**

Yeah, that's tricky. I was very involved on campus and student government and the Association of residence halls and student government, and then with the degrees. So yeah, that was definitely challenging. I used, you know, a calendar feature quite often, prioritizing what was the most important thing of the day, whether it's studying for a test or completing a project or sleeping. Also, just, I probably drink too much caffeine in college, a lot of coffee. But yeah, I think just, you know, the basics, using a calendar app, understanding what has to get done, what's due that day or in the next week, to really focus your efforts on that's kind of, that's, that's how I did it. That's kind of how I still do it today, in my in my current work.

**Kara:**

Coffee is critical. I hear you there... And tell us about your decision to get involved in student government and some of those other activities while you were on campus. I mean, that's not just any RSO, that is a huge time commitment. Talk us through what that looked like for you.

**Ryan:**

Well, I got involved in the association of residence halls through really just an RA on my floor freshman year said, Hey, we have this new role called a sustainability coordinator for the for the building I lived in Hewitt, Manchester dorm area, so I got involved and became the Sustainability Coordinator for for those dorms, and then eventually Sustainability Coordinator for ARH. And then junior year, ran and was president of ARH. And part of it was, you know, the passion for getting involved. And it was exciting to see more about how the campus worked. Also, it was good for the resume, I think back back then and then as president, a her age, maybe selfishly, you get, I think, a room and board waiver for that role. That definitely was a compelling benefit of the role. But I enjoyed the people. I enjoyed the volunteering. I enjoyed working across campus, balancing different things is fun. It was very busy, but it was fun.

**Kara:**

I imagine both of those roles would have given you some really transferable skills. So tell me about that, how those out of classroom experiences helped prepare you for your career.

**Ryan:**

That's definitely spot on. So when I was in Arh, especially in junior year, back then, the President and Vice President of ARH were responsible for coordinating the annual move in process where all the students who live in the dorms move back on a campus within a few day period. And that's, you know, it's essentially a large project. So it's project management, which is what I do now, but just on a different scale. And so it's coordinating with the project. Lease and the fire and the town of normal and the different units of departments across the university, and then getting the appropriate staffing, the volunteers. We call them curb birds, because it helps you move your stuff out of your car and onto the curb, but getting, you know, six, 8000 students off the street and into the dorms within, I think, a few days across campus, it was a good experience of project management and maybe a precursor for the career that I have now.

**Kara:**

Yeah, talk about talking points for logistics in an interview.

**Ryan:**

Yeah, yeah, that'll do it.

**Kara:**

So thinking of all of your experiences on campus, both in and out of the classroom, you're ready to graduate. What was that initial job search like for you, and I've been particularly interested to ask you this question, just because you are in a relatively new field, like you said, this sustainable renewable energy degree is still a relatively new one. So tell us what that was like for you.

**Ryan:**

I'd say back when, yes, when I graduated in 2012. Is very it was much newer. I think today it's more well established, which is great for the current the students in the current program. But when I graduated it, it was kind of a tough job market. You know? It was in 2012 it was the economy was still kind of feeling the after effects of the oh eight financial crisis. I applied to so many jobs. I applied all over country. I got to be pessimistic to any listeners, over 100 200 jobs. It was, it was a very intensive process, but yeah, I leveraged my network that I formed on campus and during and during my internships and during my student involvement, I got introductions to the right people, and I was able to land a job. I don't even know if it's on my resume anymore, but it was a startup nonprofit in Urbana Champaign called the Illinois Green Business Association. I was their first full time hire. There's four of us, the three co founders in who are all U of I grads and in their 20s. And then I was first full time hire. We worked out of a very small office that was maybe larger than a few closets, and learned a lot. It was really interesting. And then after doing that for a few, you few years, I moved, moved to Chicago to join Elevate Energy, which did energy efficiency work on low income housing projects. And that was that was great, too. But your question on the initial job search, it can be a lot. It's a lot to juggle between classes and social life of college and then trying to find a job, but it just took a lot of time and effort and a lot of hard work, but it all paid off in the end.

**Kara:**

And it's not just about finding a job, right? It's about finding that right fit for you. And it sounds like, despite the vast numbers of applications you put out there, you eventually did find that right fit. It just took a minute, right?

**Ryan:**

Oh, yeah, it was, it was the right fit. It just, it took quite a bit of time, because, I mean that again, that was 13 years ago, and I'd say the field was even more in its early stages. And I didn't even work necessarily in renewable energy more in the more the sustainability kind of side of corporate America, but it was, it all worked out, you know, it still leveraged my strengths, and it was still a good fit, and I still learned a lot. Learned a lot and grew. And I think, you know, when you're a college graduate, you're not going to, you're very rarely, going to get your first job, and it's going to be an A plus, or you're going to hit it out of the park. I think, for the first job, if you're learning something, if you're making a good income and building your network and get in building skills, think that's really, really all you can ask for, for that first job out of college.

**Kara:**

that's a great point. And so tell us you mentioned, after your time at this startup in Champaign, you then went to Chicago, and now you're a senior, senior manager at EDF renewables. So what did that trajectory look like for you?

**Ryan:**

Yeah, so I went to Chicago, and I worked for Elevate Energy and they, they were another nonprofit, and we did energy efficiency work. So that would be, you know, changing out lighting fixtures to more energy efficient lighting or heating cooling systems. I stayed in touch with my network, which you should always do, and actually through a connection at ISU. Her name was Ms. N. She's now at University of Wisconsin, but she was the director of sustainability, and I worked for Missy when I was a student leader ISU, and I stayed in touch with her. And my third job out of college was at a company called Energy Systems Group. And they did energy efficiency and renewable energy projects for cities and universities. They did a large, \$100 million kind of campus upgrade for University of Illinois, you know, upgrading the chillers and the heating systems and the lighting for a few campus buildings. But Missy, missing Air Guard, introduced me to that company. That company was looking to hire somebody in their 20s, you know, early career in a business development role. And Miss Missy made the connection from ISU, and that's how I got that job. And then while working at ESG, I got my MBA at night, and through that program and that network, I joined EDF in 2019 and EDF is a stands for electricity to France, but we're we're French company. Our parent company is headquartered in France, where the French utility essentially, but it's a global energy company. That builds, owns and operates power plants, and their EDF is headquartered in in San Diego. So my wife and I, in

2019 moved out to San Diego and lived in California for a few years, and we had our son in California, and then COVID kind of hit, and my company embraced remote work, and we were able to move back to the Chicago area, and I still work for EDF, but in a full time, remote capacity. So that's kind of been the journey I've been on. It's been fun, glad to be back in the Midwest and be closer to family, but I still work for EDF and travel here and there.

**Kara:**

Okay, so a couple follow up questions for you. You mentioned the importance of staying in touch with your network. Can you share a little bit about what that looks like for you and exactly how you do that. Because I think you know, when we say something like that to our students, it's, it sounds a little bit daunting, right? So how do you put that into practice?

**Ryan:**

small things like holiday cards, you know, sounds maybe old fashioned, but, you know, sending holiday cards or any, any special event, you know, any, any kind of event or reason to kind of reach out, and you don't even need that, you know, you can just, you can just reach out to your network and check in, get a cup of coffee, or, depending on the relationship you have, you can go for a walk, or just any reason to connect and catch up when and where. You can try to give back, you know, I've volunteered for ISU. I've given back in capacities, and that's helped me stay connected to my network. You know, it may seem strange, but like the people, your professors and maybe advisors in college, they're people too, and you're eventually probably going to become friends with them. You know, as a student, maybe you have a different relationship, you know, a student advisor, a student faculty relationship. But I a lot of my network, you know, we text, we call, we're friends. We stay in touch, you know, on social media, wishing happy birthdays. You know, welcome a new kid into their life. You send them a gift. Just, just, just kind of how you stay in touch with your friends, just investing time and energy into building meaningful relationships with people, and then if they are a part of your professional environment too, I think that's just helpful. If an opportunity comes along, then maybe they think of you first that really can't hurt. Did that answer your question?

**Kara:**

Absolutely. And personally, I love that holiday cards was your first example. I love a holiday card, and I love getting mail. And then my second question for you is, I would love to hear you kind of talk us through pros and cons of working remotely. I think you've been given a unique

opportunity. I think the pandemic changed things for a lot of people. So could you kind of share some pros and cons in your mind?

**Ryan:**

Yeah, I think pro would be, you know, right now, the chapter of life that I'm in, it's great with the flexibility provides with two small kids. My son is four, and my daughter's one, so I think the pro around that is flexibility. The next is not really a con. But I guess I'd add that while there's that flexibility, I think you should try to be more established in your career before doing remote work, because you kind of want to know how to get the job done if you're going to be a remote employee, because maybe those opportunities for kind of impromptu mentorship, and, you know, building a relationship with people are less frequent when you work remote. I would not at all recommend any any early professional or new college graduate to go for a remote job with stalling. I would strongly recommend against that, because you just you build relationships with people maybe a little faster in an office environment, especially when you're out of college trying to learn that transition from college work to professional working, you can't replace that by being in the office. I transitioned to a remote work after a decade plus. I'm in my mid 30s now, so yeah, over maybe a decade and a half of working in an office. So I think, you know, I I've had that experience, and I still, frankly, treat, treated today like it's an office day, going, you know, logging on by a certain hour, and having, you know, I'm fortunate enough with my my house that we have a dedicated office space. So it's very kind of mimics the office environment. But yeah, that's my kind of thoughts on remote work. I guess. If that answers your question.

**Kara:**

Thanks for sharing. And just so you're aware, Ryan, we have listeners from all across the college and the university, and I'm wondering, how would you describe your job to someone outside of the industry.

**Ryan:**

In my current work, my department is the department I work in is our portfolio and project management department within EDF and and basically we, we are part of a team that builds, you know, just to kind of say simply, we build very, very large power plants. People, maybe think of a power plant as nuclear or coal or natural gas, but a wind or a solar project or a battery storage project is a power plant. Essentially, it takes a tremendous amount of engineering and procurement and raw materials and permits and land to get it developed and built, and takes a

lot of money to get it find. Advanced. I sit on a team that takes a earlier stage power plant that's under what we call development. So we were getting the land and the permits, and we kind of lead that project through what we would call, like an early stage project to essentially construction, and then handing off to operations team. So if you, you know, maybe draw a parallel or a metaphor to another industry, if you just think of real estate development, estate development, if you're trying to build a new gas station, or you're trying to build a new fast food restaurant, or what have you, there's, there's probably a team that's out there prospecting, trying to find a location to build a new restaurant, build a new office complex, or what have you, there's team that's out there prospecting, trying to find the right location to build it. But then once they found the location, they have it, kind of, it's a very real opportunity. Then they kind of hand it off to a team to get it built. And that's essentially my, my role. So it's, it's getting things, leading them through the engineering, through the procurement of all the heavy equipment, the high voltage equipment, and then it's a lot of problem solving these. These things take years to to get built. And so a lot can happen in a few years. From a regulatory standpoint. There can be change in laws, there can be inflation on prices, there could be supply chain constraints. And so a lot of my work is problem solving and scheduling and managing managing budgets and managing risks. But that's kind of how I would describe my work to somebody who maybe not necessarily be in the industry.

**Kara:**

And what would you say the favorite part of your job is?

**Ryan:**

Every single day is different, and the problems are different and the topics are different, just in the next you know, today, for example, I'm going to be on meetings and discussions on permitting, financing, on engineering, on regulatory matters, on negotiating contracts. So it's a very diverse role in my field. And I think probably most fields, you have specialists that they do one thing, or they do a few things, but they, they're really a specialist in that, in that area, and that's that is their their kind of lane I am to be more of a generalist and kind of swim across lanes and maybe spot problems before they start coming up. And so I need to know enough to spot those problems. And I guess know enough to know when to bring in the expert, the subject matter expert. You know, we have, we have PhDs in electrical engineering. I need to know when to include them, when maybe it's not a good use of their time to be included. So I think, just to



answer your question, the diverse range of topics that I touch on is very interesting, probably the favorite part of my job.

**Kara:**

And on the flip side, what would you say the most challenging thing about your job is?

**Ryan:**

It's a very it's very tumultuous time, I think, in the, frankly, in society, not not to get into politics, but any, anytime there is any kind of change in laws, for instance, with the new administration, new tariffs on on raw materials and goods steel, that that is something you have to adopt to, and that that doesn't matter which which administration is in office, changes can occur in within any presidency. So not not getting political, but just any kind of regulatory change that could occur. You know, for example, when COVID 19 came, that was a tremendous impact to my industry, because we are the supply chain for building a power plant. Is a global supply chain. We get materials shipped in from across the world. And if you, I don't know if you remember during the pandemic, but there are stories of all the ships on the coast of LA and the Port of Houston and port of New York trying to bring in raw materials, because everyone was at home, and they're ordering supplies faster than the retailers could supply them the steel and the main power transformers and the electrical the turbines or The solar modules that were going into our power plants were on some of those boats, and that wasn't just my company, it was all all the companies. And so it's a very dynamic, fast paced environment, and a lot can happen quickly. It's a globalized economy, and so any of those macro level changes impact how we get these power plants built, so that that's the challenge you have to work through.

**Kara:**

And one other question I have for you. I'm wondering how you would describe your leadership style, and I'm especially interested to ask you this because you had so many leadership opportunities on campus as a student. So when I ask you, how would you describe your leadership style, I'm also asking, have you seen it evolve over the last 10-15, years? Has it changed, or has it always been a core style that you've really stuck to throughout your leadership journey?

**Ryan:**

Those that know me well, they can say that I'm rather direct at times, for better or worse, and so I think really honest, transparent and sometimes direct feedback has been a part of my communication style. I'm a strong believer in effective communication and being very clear and concise. Think leading, leading by your actions, is extremely important. I think one thing that's changed is I've gotten you know more more seasoned is just working on that communication style and and adjusting it to the audience. It's definitely something I've been working on. And that's, that's a journey of life, is you're always working to improve yourself. But I do try to kind of foster that, that environment, that team environment, that we, we all do our work, we all we all know our role. We all have a job to do. And now, especially in a professional setting, that's slightly different than when you're a student leader, because a student leader, I think it's, it's a good training ground, but you're a student first, and the your leader second. So you know, compare that to in the working environment like you, like you're in right now, your job is your job. That's we have to do, and so you need to prioritize that. And so just being clear on who's on the who's doing what, what the responsibilities are, what the timelines are, and then not being afraid to get in there and do the work yourself and lead by example, I think is really important. That's something I've tried to do throughout my career. Career is lead by example. Is the thing that can motivate folks if they see a team leader diving into the thick of it and working long hours to get things done, that can be that could be motivating as well. Sorry, I'm losing my voice, but yeah, I think that's that kind of summarizes my leadership style.

**Kara:**

Absolutely. Thank you for sharing. Well, we'll finish with a speed round. So these answers are short. You don't need much of a voice for this, and we're almost done. So Ryan, just go with your first instinct on these questions, Salty or sweet?

**Ryan:**

Salty.

**Kara:**

What's your favorite day of the week?

**Ryan:**

Saturday.

**Kara:**

What is your go-to easy dinner?

**Ryan:**

Probably still pizza.

**Kara:**

What are you reading or listening to right now? Can you recommend a book or a podcast to us?

**Ryan:**

Well, I have two little kids, so I'm doing a lot of Berenstain Bears books right now. Do a lot of kids books. I then I going to cop out on this, this one, because after reading contracts all day and reading a lot of kids books at night. I'm a little tapped out. We'll add a watching. I just watched the Netflix show, Mo, I'd recommend that.

**Kara:**

Hey, I'm impressed it's not blue, so you've got that going for you... How do you relax?

**Ryan:**

I do a lot of bowling. I'm in a bowling league a very, I'm in a very, I'm in full suburban dad mode. And so I'm in a bowling league on Tuesdays. That's probably my main hobby outside of family and work.

**Kara:**

I love that. No one has ever given me that answer before.

**Ryan:**

It's full, full time, full suburban dad mode. That's fun. My two neighbors actually are in league with me. It's, it's, it's actually pretty adorable. So that's awesome.

**Kara:**

What is the best trip you've ever taken?

**Ryan:**

That's a tough one. Two years ago, I went to Hawaii with my two year old son, wife and my parents, and that was really cool to see him traveling. That was a lot of fun seeing on an airplane for the first time. Got a little tired of him being on the airplane because it's a long flight, but it's his excitement for the trip was just really cool. So I'm pretty excited to see this trip we're about to go on with our with our kids. That would be fun to just see see their excitement and have a good time with them.

**Kara:**

Which island did you go to?

**Ryan:**

We went to Oahu.

**Kara:**

Oh, very nice. And I ask everybody that comes on the podcast, Avanti gondola or pub two cheese balls.

**Ryan:**

Pub, two cheese balls, but I prefer whiskey Wednesdays at Maggie's fair.

**Kara:**

I love that. All right, one last question for you. If you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

**Ryan:**

All like the basics, you know, get internships, get experience, get good grades, but if you can balance that and have a have a good social life, whatever that be, maybe I'd recommend that, because life does get busier, and those four years of college, or however long it is, are really special.

**Kara:**

Well, thanks so much for that advice, and thanks again for being here. That was Ryan Wolber, Senior Manager at EDF renewables. Join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our CAST alumni.

