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How Do We Fix America’s Skills Gap? Use All Our Talent!

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It’s no secret a skills mismatch is holding back American businesses and jobseekers. Millions in this country remain out of work or underemployed, yet more than five million jobs remain unfilled in the U.S. Some 45 percent of employers say a lack of skills is the leading reason for entry-level vacancies, according to a recent McKinsey survey.

Meanwhile, there are nearly six million young men and women, ages 16-24, who are currently unemployed and out-of-school, who have the potential to fill these jobs. This demographic is lately called “opportunity youth” because they are both seeking opportunity as well as offering an opportunity to society if we invest in them. Many face challenges such as being born into poverty, leaving high school without a diploma and/or having criminal records for minor offenses.
Faced with these realities, what can our nation do to repair our broken labor market and better match all Americans with opportunities? One solution is surprisingly simple: Invest in all of our talent.

As the CEO of YouthBuild U.S.A., Inc. which serves as the national support center for a network of over 260 local YouthBuild programs, I know the power of working with young adults who desperately seek a chance to break the chains of poverty. Not only do young adults lift themselves up when treated with respect, love, and offered a proven comprehensive approach including academic, job and leadership skills, but whole communities are lifted up with them. YouthBuild graduate Michael Donnelly is a moving illustration.

Michael became a father when he was only a junior in high school. He subsequently dropped out and worked odd jobs to support his family, but became gang involved, and ended up sentenced to three months in county jail. The judge, recognizing the value of a second chance, allowed Michael to apply and participate in the local YouthBuild program while he served his time. That decision was a turning point in Michael’s life. In the 15 years since, he completed the comprehensive education, job training, community service and leadership development program at YouthBuild McLean County, he has served as Street/Gang Outreach Worker, Youth Interventionist for the local public school, Community Impact Manager for United Way and now advisor to the police department on police-community relations. His three teen-aged sons, whom he has raised with his wife in a stable marriage, are succeeding in school and college.
Holistic full-time programs like YouthBuild that prepare young people for college and employment, service and leadership, are one proven solution that should be expanded through further public investment. In addition, if we take advantage of new, flexible models of education, and better match people to good jobs, many more young people like Michael can pursue rewarding career paths. If we recognize the talent around us, with greater collaboration, funding, and scale, we can get millions off the sidelines and, in turn, address our skills gap.

The urgency of providing opportunity for all Americans is what brought together a diverse group of business leaders, educators, policymakers and advocates, myself included, to join Rework America, convened by the Markle Foundation.

Markle and its partners, including LinkedIn, ASU, edX and employers and educators in the state of Colorado and city of Phoenix recently announced Rework America Connected. This is a partnership to build and test an innovative set of technology tools and support systems to create a pipeline of more qualified workers to fill open and future middle-skill jobs. Businesses will post the skills workers need to fill open jobs, while workers, armed with this knowledge, will know the skills they need to be eligible for the work and can match themselves to available training, education providers, and mentors to secure them.

Such support is a key part of reconnecting Americans who are looking for meaningful work and career paths, as well as young adults who along the way have gotten off track but have found a point of reconnection like YouthBuild, Service and Conservation Corps, Public Allies, Year Up, or the ChalleNGe program, that can help them navigate on-line information. Ultimately, it’s everyone who benefits from these offerings: individuals, our communities, our businesses, our economy, and our entire nation.

(Dorothy Stoneman is CEO and Founder of YouthBuild USA, Inc., member of Rework America, and co-author of America’s Moment: Creating Opportunity in the Connected Age.)
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