

# Start Talking Skills, Not Just Jobs

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With President Obama's Joint Address to Congress, a GOP Presidential Debate, and Republican candidates starting to unveil their economic plans, Americans are hearing a lot about job creation this week. And while creating jobs and getting Americans back to work should be paramount in these tough economic times, an essential element often seems to be missing from the conversation.

What Americans are less likely to hear about is making sure workers have the skills and training they need to fill these jobs. Yet the truth is that unless we significantly address the preparedness of our workforce, we're unlikely to help Americans fill the millions of open jobs that exist today, or prepare the next generation of workers for the jobs of the future.

Because while much has been made of America's changing economy, so far we are still only on the brink of changing how we educate and train workers to meet these shifting demands.

In an increasingly competitive global economy, America's economic strength depends on the education and skills of its workers. Every worker, especially in this economy, deserves a chance to retrain and build new skills and seek the next opportunity.

And opportunities are available. At the end of June, there were over three million open jobs in the United States, including 498,000 open jobs in trade, transportation and utilities and 584,000 open jobs in education and health services. Employers report that they're unable to fill these open positions due to a lack of skills-ready applicants.

How do we change that? With smart, innovative public-private partnerships that bring businesses to the table to make sure our workforce is getting the right skills on the front-end. Because to be effective, solutions to the workforce challenge need to address the problems that confront workers and employers.

For instance, Skills for America's Future, the newest policy initiative at Aspen, was created specifically to connect businesses and community colleges to create or expand high-impact partnerships. Partnerships lead to better trained workers and employers who are ready and willing to hire them.

Already some of the country's leading businesses and industry associations are committing to partnerships through the Skills for America's Future effort. These partners recognize that unless businesses and educational institutions - including high schools, four-year colleges and community colleges - work together, it will be impossible to provide training that's accessible, affordable and meets workforce demands.

Dovetailing with this step is the work of another project of the Aspen Institute, the Workforce Strategies Initiative. Their approach is simple: Pick an industry. Build relationships to find out what jobs are available and skills are needed. Identify people who would like to qualify for those jobs and build a skill development program that ensures those people are prepared with the range of skills required and that they're ready when businesses need them. With more than a decade of research and evaluation, this initiative has shown that training works if it's done right and linked to actual job openings or to skills missing in a region's economy.

Importantly, these approaches recognize that the workers of tomorrow are not only younger students coming from high schools or colleges -- but that they also must include adults who are seeking to transition to a new industry or who have long sought a way up from low-wage, part-time jobs. To transform our economy, we can't just rely on the latest crop of young graduates, but also must include these adult workers, who often have a variety of family responsibilities and may need new educational models that facilitate a balance of work and learning.

Only with creative, meaningful relationships and innovative approaches can we begin to change workforce training and development in America. Growing regional economies and competitive industry sectors is the key to growing our national economy. And it's going to take U.S. businesses, educational institutions, workforce partners and government all working together to create a more competitive America and allow workers to achieve the right skills.

This change in how we train and develop people's skills won't be easy, but everyone will enjoy the benefits. American workers will have the ability to find and stay in good jobs. Employers will be able to prosper and grow with job applicants trained with the right skills on the front end. Our economy will be stronger and more competitive long term. And with stronger businesses comes the creation of more stable, high-paying jobs.

An example of this change can be found at the General Service Technician Program at Shoreline Community College in Seattle -- a first step for students interested in careers in automotive services. The Puget Sound Auto Dealers Association has its offices in the same building on campus, linking students directly to industry partners. Despite the economic downturn, this program has placed nearly 90% of its graduates into jobs, most of whom had neither college nor industry experience before entering the program.

The General Service Technician program is proof that some of the most successful job training programs are those designed with specific jobs in mind. The key is in identifying and developing training models that provide students with industry-recognized and economically valuable skills. Training models that work.

A robust economy will be one that can supply the right people with the right skills at the right time. Innovative partnerships can make this happen, helping train better

workers, building a stronger economy and getting more Americans back to work. That's why it's time to talk about skills -- not just jobs.

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