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HOW CIOs CAN BRIDGE THE YOUTH TECH SKILLS GAP

By Gary Beach
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I traveled last week to Pittsburgh to address members of the Greater Pittsburgh CIO Group on what they must do to bridge the skills gap, a vexing national workforce development issue.

On mornings when I speak, my routine is to wake early to make final revisions to my slide deck. As I booted up my computer that morning in Pittsburgh, I turned on the television and watched as images of the Baltimore riot filled the screen.

Two hours later, I made two revisions to my deck. I added an opening slide embedded with an image of a burning police vehicle in Baltimore. Then followed it with a slide, previously buried in my presentation, showing youth unemployment trends from 2007 to 2014.

The revised deck produced the desired effect. The audience was stunned. Perhaps more so by the slide which starkly compared the 14.3 percent youth unemployment rate to the national average of 5.5 percent. The chief information officers in the room were clueless that the unemployment rate for young Americans age 16 to 24 was that high. As they continued to stare at the slide, I added, "there are 3,350,000 unemployed youth in America and youth unemployment rates are even higher for African Americans (24 percent) and Hispanics (16 percent)".

On my flight home to Boston, I continued to think about the audience's reaction to my opening slides and wondered: what could I do to get chief information officers across the country involved in efforts to lower the youth unemployment rate?

And then an idea struck.

For 10 years, I have worked as an advisor to a Boston-based non-profit called Year-Up. Perhaps, I thought, getting chief information officers involved in Year Up could be the on-ramp to that skills gap "bridge" for tens of thousands of tech executives.

Founded in 2000 by Gerald Chertavian, Year Up's mission is to identify urban youth aged 16-24, "who are highly motivated but lack opportunities" and transition them from "poverty to professional careers in tech fields in the mainstream economy" within one year, hence the name of the program. Year Up programs operate nationwide in Boston, Providence, New York City, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Jacksonville, Miami, Chicago, Phoenix, Seattle, San Francisco and San Jose.

Year Up's business model is elegantly simple. Through a competitive selection process, the organization recruits recent high school graduates to participate in a rigorous 12-month job-training program. During the first six months, in a classroom setting, Year Up students learn vital technology and business skills like Web development, analytics, communication and collaboration. In the second six months, students intern with Year Up's 250 corporate partners, usually medium to large businesses in the local area, applying their skills and gaining critical work experience.

The Year Up model works and has been featured on CBS News 60 Minutes. Since Year Up's 2000 inception, 85 percent of students have either gone on to attend college, or secure a

job, within four months of graduating from the program. Those with jobs earned an average salary of \$16 an hour compared to the federal government's baseline mandate of \$7.25.

Mr. Chertavian runs the non-profit professionally and even has a vibration app on his smartphone that alerts him each time one of Year-Up's 10,000 graduates gets a new job or earns a new degree. During a recent 30-minute meeting I had with him, the app went off three times!

The future will be built on job opportunities enabled by technology. And chief information officers have a pivotal role, and responsibility, in shaping that future for America's 3,350,000 jobless youths. Chief information officers can no longer be "dogs barking at the employment caravan." They must get involved. Now.

Today, no matter how busy you are rolling out some mission critical Big Data, cloud or social business project, I want you to stop and ask yourself, "how can I get involved in giving the youth of America a better future?" There are hundreds of programs like Year Up across the United States. You probably already know ones that operate in your area. Pick up your phone, and call one of them today.

The internships, apprenticeships and jobs on your staff can be the "bridge" to a brighter future for millions of young, jobless Americans.

Gary J. Beach is former publisher of CIO Magazine and author of "The U.S. Technology Skills Gap".