GETTING BUSINESS THE WORKERS IT NEEDS

Megan Smith, Ryan Burke on public-private partnerships to give employees the right *skills*

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Getting the right talent for the job is a critical issue for the middle market. One of the ideas put forward as a solution is public-private partnerships—efforts such as TechHire, a program where employers collaborate with learning centers and economic-development groups to give potential workers accelerated training.

The Wall Street Journal's Dennis Berman spoke with Megan Smith,U.S. chief technology officer at the Office of Science and Technology Policy; and Ryan Burke, senior policy adviser on the White House National Economic Council.

Here are edited excerpts of the conversation.

Finding the right fit

MR. BERMAN: *Can the government help people find high-qualified technical help?*

MS. SMITH: It's a critical thing that we're all working on together. There are 5.5 million jobs open, and so people are really struggling to find folks. There are a lot of great programs and systems and methods we can use to solve that. Ryan, you should talk about some of the things that we've done with TechHire.

MS. BURKE: One of the things we've found is we have a lot of public institutions that the government is spending billions of dollars on a year. For example, we invest about $30 billion in Pell grants to get low-income folks through community colleges and training programs.

When you look at those programs, far too often the skills they are teaching students are not well aligned with the things that employers are looking to hire for. One of the approaches we've been taking is to encourage employers, mayors, training programs in communities across the country to come together around a better articulation of what jobs are actually in demand locally, what are the skills that are needed for those jobs, and then have a broad set of providers respond.

We were in the state of Delaware, and the governor convened his biggest tech companies in financial services. And one of the things they found is their community college was producing people with Cobol [programming] skills rather than Java [programming] skills, which is what their employers needed. With that kind of new feedback loop, they were able to upgrade their program to be better aligned with what employers were looking to hire for. I think it's taking the dollars that we're already investing, but making sure the programs are actually tighter matched to what your companies need.

MR. BERMAN: *What's the quality of the people I can find in the TechHire program?*

MS. SMITH: This is a good example. The team from Square [Inc.] went to St. Louis, because they're from St. Louis and they wanted to give back. They have a Silicon Valley company, and so they opened an office there to give back jobs and opportunities. What

they did was rent an auditorium and offer [job seekers an online class in coding from Harvard].

This whole crew of people showed up. Many of the people were actually already programmers, but they were out of work because they had old languages. Or they weren't hired. They weren't getting sucked up into that inner network.
With the first cohort, employers were not accustomed to hiring [people with that kind of] a different résumé. [They hired these people with the understanding that they would] let the person go if it didn't work out. All of them stayed hired.

Doing the legwork

MR. BERMAN: *So it sounds like there's still some work that has to be done by the employer to get qualified workers under TechHire. You can't just go to the supermarket and pluck them off the shelf.*

MS. SMITH: Well, you have to upgrade your training programs.

MS. BURKE: [There's also the question of] up-credentialing. For example, for even computer-user support specialists, right now about 40% of them have four-year degrees. If you look at typical job descriptions, we're requiring them in over 70% of jobs.

I think one thing [we have to do is to take] a hard look at whether we have the right set of standards for what folks need that allow them to show what skills they have and not be overlooked.

In the example Megan gave [about the training program that began in St. Louis], President Obama told a story about a woman who had applied to hundreds of tech companies, but she didn't have that typical four-year degree. She had the skills and couldn't even get an interview anywhere until that organization vouched for her.

So I think that it's a combination of looking at standards and trying to think about how can we give people a shot based on what they can really do, and then finding community partners.

MR. BERMAN: *Maybe we need to overhaul the visa policy in this country. Maybe there should be a special visa for smaller companies.*

MS. SMITH: We were just with the Canadians. [Canada has a program where anybody who comes to Canada to study and then graduates] with a STEM degree, they basically give them a green card.

If you get a job in Canada and you've just graduated from their incredible universities, they would like to keep your talent and leverage.

They want to keep that talent because we already know from research that diverse teams make the best products. The thing that's great about America is that we come from everywhere. Those who just are stepping off a plane and might be going to our university to take a degree, let's keep those people. Let's collect everybody, all of our talent.

MR. BERMAN: *I think for a lot of people, they're happy to just get anyone to do the job. Diversity feels like, frankly, a secondary need to just having someone to do the work. And if they all look the same, well maybe that's just the way it has to be. Why is it important to*

put the two ideas together, both diversity and technical know-how, when maybe we just need technical know-how first and diversity second?

MS. SMITH: What's really interesting is that it's just if you have a baseball team, you wouldn't want to play a third of the team. That's just silly, right? All of our research shows, everybody's talented. And so what are we doing to inhibit talent or help accelerate talent?

The president launched Computer Science for All. Nine out of 10 American parents want their kids to learn coding at school. So, we've got to help our teachers and our schools.

We're seeing states stepping up. We're hoping Congress will approve some of the financials. But already the National Science Foundation and the Corporation for National and Community Service have put $134 million into teacher training to make this happen.

It's an incredible opportunity for kids. This also is an unboring way to learn.

We should teach STEM and coding and these things so that instead of sitting and book-learning, you're in more of an art or music or [physical education]-like experience while you're learning math and science. You're doing project-based learning, science fair. You're learning the key things.