

# BUILDING THE WORKFORCE OF TOMORROW — BUSINESS LEADERS STEPPING UP

Dane Linn, Vice President, Business Roundtable, Jan 19, 2016

By creating new ways of learning and working, we not only can close the skills gap — but unlock the economy's growth potential.

Ask CEOs what their top challenge is and they will tell you: recruiting and retaining skilled talent across their enterprises.

While the problem may be global, the solutions often play out on a local level. Take Huntington Ingalls Industries, a shipbuilder in Virginia. CEO Mike Petters describes his central challenge — turning novices into skilled shipbuilders. Since that's not a degree offered in many schools, they built their own school. The result: not only have they surpassed 10,000 graduates from their flagship school, but graduates routinely stay at the company for the long haul.

While each industry or company may find its own solution to solving the skills gap, much can be shared and learned among everyone who faces this problem. That's why I was gratified to see that Employment, Skills and Human Capital is featured as a key challenge area of the annual [World Economic Forum](#) meeting in Davos later this month.

About a year ago, Business Roundtable partnered with Change the Equation to ask CEOs just how big a problem the skills gap actually is. Despite the broad coverage of the issue, and despite its importance to many CEOs, we were still surprised by the results.

Nearly 98 percent of CEOs said that the skills gap was a problem for their companies. The gap affected all levels of jobs — from entry level to those requiring experience — and CEOs particularly struggled to find candidates with the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) skills needed for technical positions that are the foundation of economic growth.

These results prompted us to step up our efforts to identify and support effective programs in the increasingly connected worlds of education, training and work. One year later, we have some encouraging progress to report, but also a clear understanding that righting this ship will take some time. It will take a [multipronged approach](#) to confront this challenge.

It all starts with our longstanding role as a leading voice in K-12 education in the United States, especially for elementary education. Business Roundtable remains vocal in supporting challenging academic standards in primary and secondary education, benchmarked against the best ones used by our global competitors. States should maintain flexibility in what precise standards they adopt, but they must be tied to what colleges, employers and the military expect from students.

In Washington, we continue to urge policymakers to enact legislation that modernizes the U.S. education system and raises the bar for students and schools alike, such as the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#).

The focus must continue after high school graduation, as well. That is why our CEOs are [calling for a modernized Higher Education Act](#) and are working to ensure career and technical education programs authorized under the [Perkins Act align with employer needs](#).

Government, of course, cannot solve every problem. Business Roundtable is also building public-private partnerships to ensure college-level students are prepared to meet employers' needs on the job in key economic sectors. Working with the [Business-Higher Education Forum](#), we're bringing together leaders from business and higher education to transform undergraduate education in emerging fields, such as financial services data analytics.

Closing the skills gap for the long run, however, will require building a nation of life-long learners. First steps toward that goal include a transformation of the relationship between employers and employees — as well as better collaboration between business and community colleges. To zero-in on these priorities, Business Roundtable and ACT Foundation launched the [National Network of Business and Industry Associations](#), an innovative partnership that joins 25 organizations focused on better connecting learning and work.

We need to develop tools that:

- articulate the [common employability skills](#) required for workers across all career fields;
- rethink how various professional organizations build credentials to help workers move easily between professions; and
- increase the use of competency-based hiring practices across the entire economy.

If we get this right, we can do more than just close the skills gap. We can create new ways of learning and working, which will unlock the potential of employees and generate new growth that benefits all of us. This will put more people in more jobs, which will grow the economy and create even more jobs for tomorrow — and beyond.

For the CEOs who will be on hand in Davos, their message will be clear: that brighter future begins now.

Please send me an [email](#) if you would like to learn more or get involved with any of these efforts.

*Dane Linn, a Vice President at Business Roundtable, oversees the Education & Workforce Committee, advancing Business Roundtable positions on education reform, U.S. innovation.*