



Early Learning Pays Off

January 17, 2017 Audrey Russo



On any given day, the Pittsburgh Technology Council's Career Connector (pghcareerconnector.com) lists about 550 open jobs in the local technology Industry.

According to the Council's annual "State of the Industry Report," 9,948 technology-intensive firms are located in our 13-county region. This includes about 1,600 pure-play tech companies like Google, Uber, Apple and Facebook. And they are always looking for new talent.

Collectively, the region's tech industry employs 302,535 people accounting for nearly 24 percent of our total workforce. Their combined \$22 billion annual payroll represents more than 35 percent of western Pennsylvania's wages, according to the "State of the Industry Report."

Nationally, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects that employment opportunities in computer and information technology will increase by more than 10 percent over the next decade, resulting in 488,500 new jobs.

These are well-paying jobs. As of 2015, the BLS confirmed the median annual salary in the tech sector was \$81,430, more than two times higher than the \$36,200 median salary for all other occupations.

So, the question isn't whether tech jobs are a sure bet—they are. The real question is whether there will be enough qualified people to fill them—and that is far from certain.

Even a few years ago, the U.S. News & World Report asserted that 2 to 3 million positions were left to wallow on job-search sites because companies couldn't find workers with basic technical skills. The same article predicted that by 2019, that number would approach the 10 million mark. Think about what that might mean not only for individual companies, but for our regional and national economies. Investing in the future workforce makes good business sense.

And nothing impacts the future more than the success of today's kids. I'm not just talking about college, high school, or even middle school children; I'm talking about our earliest learners, ages 5 and younger.

According to the Wall Street Journal, "Evidence is mounting about the importance of teaching math in preschool and kindergarten ... if children don't have good instruction and effective teachers in the early grades, they are more likely to struggle later when they face more complicated concepts."

Research tells us that early learning not only supports cognitive abilities, but also social and emotional skills such as focusing, persevering and working well with others. These traits are



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important in all workplaces, but they are especially necessary in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields.

Ironically, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize that the road forward to bridging the gap between the number of available tech jobs and the number of qualified applicants starts with early learning programs.

Problem solved? Far from it.

The reality is that many kids fall behind before they even get a chance to start. Last year, about 175,000 of our state's 3 and 4 year olds were facing the risk of academic failure simply because they were living in lower income households. Each year, nearly 64 percent of those kids—that's 114,000 children—have no access to high-quality publicly-funded programs like PA Pre-K Counts and Head Start.

It's an unsustainable trajectory. That's why I'm urging the business community in general, and the tech sector in particular, to speak out and take action. Here are a few simple steps to take that could make a big difference.

- * Talk about the importance of early learning on your social media platforms.
- * Talk to your peers and employees. Make sure they understand the importance of early learning and encourage them to get involved.
- * Reach out to civic organizations and encourage them to get involved.
- * Expand your STEM initiatives to include pre-K.
- * Call on state and local government to make smart funding decisions.
- * Contact policy makers to talk about your concerns.

Think about it. The innovators of tomorrow—the people who will no doubt change our world in unexpected and exciting ways—are in diapers today. And when it comes to the first five years, there are no do-overs. We can't afford to limit their imagination, creativity, problem-solving abilities—their intellect—by limiting their families' options to quality early learning.

Our future depends on it.