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Increasing Access to Workforce-Ready Talent: A Look at the “Partnership for Lebanon”

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The ability to hire workforce-ready employees is one of the most mission-critical requirements for any organization. For decades, U.S. companies have expanded operations in international markets, but there is something emerging here: a “disconnect” that demands companies’ attention.

We are entering an era of talent scarcity where lack of access to ready talent threatens a favorable business climate and creates drag on a company’s achievement of its performance goals, or those of its partners, including suppliers and distributors.

When education systems produce professionals with basic knowledge, but not the skills to apply it in the workplace, multinationals face a talent gap that slows their performance.

Closing the Talent Gap

Only 25 percent of Indian professionals are considered employable by multinationals, according to research published by Hewlett and Rashid in the May 2010 issue of the Harvard Business Review.

Companies that ignore the other 75 percent—using the India example as an illustrative case—will face an ever-deepening talent gap as they and their partners attempt to penetrate or expand into new international markets and have to manage the risks related to hiring unprepared labor.

Corporate decision makers walk a fine line between expanding international operations into areas that are not workforce ready and waiting for interventions that will produce a more prepared labor force.

They could expand operations too quickly or too soon and play catch up with local talent that is ill-prepared to meet job demands.

Or they could wait, but wait for what? Wait for local education systems to produce job-ready talent? Wait for cultural shifts that encourage such values as collaboration across networks, continuous learning, or leading by influence?

Companies don’t have to wait for major sectoral changes in a country’s education system to achieve the workforce readiness they require to grow. Nor do companies have to “fix” education systems. They can instead focus on market segments and create

alternative pathways for getting professionals into the workforce. The result is enhanced career opportunities for the community and a more innovative and effective workforce for the company and its partners. This advances the company and creates the favorable business climate necessary for performance and shareholder value.

“Partnership for Lebanon”

In 2007, Cisco Systems teamed with the non-governmental organization America-Mideast Education and Training Services, Inc. (AMIDEAST) under the “Partnership for Lebanon” to create alternative pathways to employment. The plan pipelined high-potential talent into pathways that served as direct feeders into the Lebanese workforce.

Qualified Lebanese professionals worked as interns with companies in Lebanon and in the U.S. One group of interns was placed with different Cisco Systems partners in Lebanon—companies that were not in a position to take on new staff. Through this program, Cisco covered the costs, allowing the interns to develop revenue-generating work streams and otherwise add value to the partner company. At the end of the 11-month program, all the interns were hired by the partner companies as full-time employees, where they continue to enhance business operations and generate new revenue.

Other groups of Lebanese professionals were pipelined into six-month internships with the Cisco Systems corporate headquarters in San Jose, California. All returned to Lebanon and found full-time employment with Cisco Systems, Cisco partners or other institutions, including a bank that became a Cisco client after the intern it hired convinced them to purchase Cisco products.

In the partnership, AMIDEAST provided support that Cisco preferred to outsource: identifying the talent, developing the corporate internships in Lebanon and monitoring the progress of the interns in Lebanon and those in the U.S. Cisco Systems funding supported the activities, Cisco headquarters worked directly with U.S.-based interns, and it was Cisco’s vision that determined the objectives and overall direction.

As a result of this program, Cisco Systems stands to gain market share in Lebanon through greater innovation from the interns, new growth and strength from its partner companies, increased market reach and growth, and increased competitiveness.



The program not only empowered the interns and increased their sense of well-being, but it has a multiplier effect in doing so for the interns' families and the communities in which they live. In this way, Cisco has also contributed to a more favorable climate in which to conduct business and they enhanced their brand and reputation.

Corporate Social Responsibility Funding or Business Strategy Investing?

Workforce-readiness programs that are accountable to advancing the company and creating a favorable business climate can be articulated as a strategy of investing in high-value programs and partnerships that promote human progress and economic development. An education and training focus within that strategy, such as pipelining talent through internships, will achieve a better workforce and a better community in which the business can operate.

Improving the business and investment environment and services for the company makes capital safe. Improving the capacities of the company to operate makes capital welcome. And improving the impact of investment on the educated, but unprepared labor force is where we talk about profitability for companies and their partners.

In other words, this strategy with its focus on education and training addresses three dimensions of capital. Human capital development results in a more prepared labor pool. Increased social capital provides a better community and business climate in which to

operate. Financial capital advances the business and achieves required performance with profitability and financial return.

A surprising bonus is that where these three areas overlap, you have what might be called "strategic philanthropy" that companies can capitalize on for reputation and employee retention, which are both important business drivers.

Companies can fund this kind of program as a corporate social responsibility strategy that has business value or invest in this as a business strategy that also has social value. Either way, companies have the most convenient platform of all to work with—their own business operations. Through mentoring and internship pathways that use that platform, companies can serve as direct feeders for talent into the workforce, driving their own core business strategy, and creating social capital.

For more information about the Cisco-AMIDEAST partnership or details about the program to pipeline high-potential talent, contact Ms. Kate Archambault, karchambault@amideast.org.

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