

President Trump knows: Apprenticeships will boost wages and fill jobs

Alex Acosta, U.S. secretary of labor 2:57 p.m. CT June 14, 2017



(Photo: SHAWN T. MOORE, U.S. Department of Labor)

There are 6 million job openings in the United States. This is the highest number of jobs on record. In a Business Roundtable survey of CEOs released just last week, 95 percent of executives reported difficulty finding qualified employees. Americans want to work; American companies want to hire. The available jobs, however, do not match the prospective employees' job skills.

This skills gap is a particular challenge in some of the fastest growing sectors of the economy: financial services, health care and information technology. The skills gap also persists in other sectors. For example, there are 360,000 job vacancies in manufacturing. There are also 200,000 available construction jobs, and with President Donald Trump's forthcoming investment in infrastructure, that number will, in all likelihood, increase substantially.

Apprenticeships teach the skills needed to find a good, stable job and to succeed in that job. Apprenticeship programs combine a paid work component with an educational component. Moreover, apprentices earn while they learn, reducing or entirely avoiding the substantial burden of student loans.

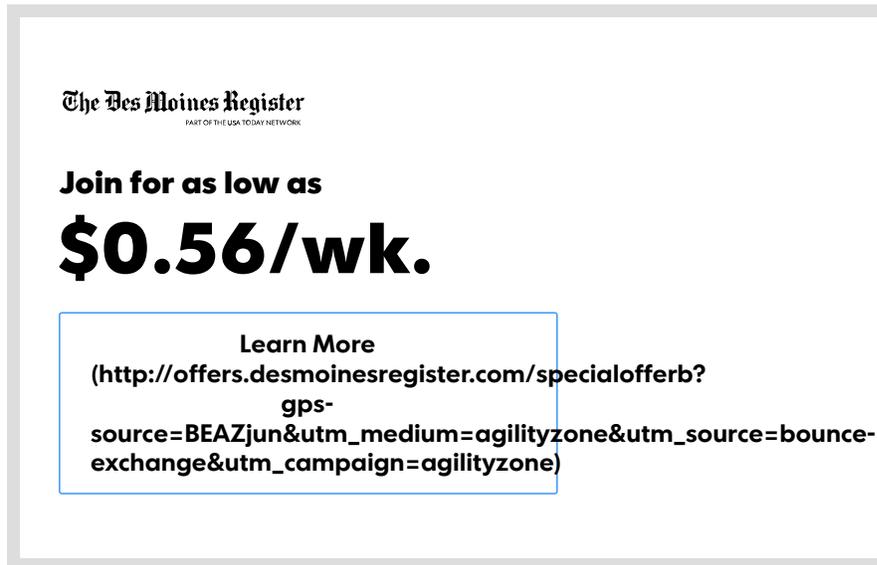
During a recent trip to Michigan, I visited with apprentices at the Ford Motor Co.'s Dearborn Truck Plant. The apprenticeship program there combines hundreds of hours of traditional education with experience-based, on-the-job training in manufacturing. The program offers education and experience, without student debt.

The most obvious and immediate benefit for graduating apprentices is a high-earning job. Individuals who complete an apprenticeship program, on average, earn a starting wage of more than \$60,000 per year. This is higher than the average starting salary of students who graduate from traditional colleges. And nearly nine out of 10 are employed upon completing their apprenticeships.

These higher wages and improved employment prospects make sense. Graduates of apprenticeship programs hit the ground running when they start a job. The skills developed during their education prepare apprentices for the jobs they will actually do. As a result, they are more productive at the outset and tend to be more loyal to the employer.

Despite these benefits, apprentices make up only 0.3 percent of the American workforce, with large-scale apprenticeship programs largely limited to the construction sector. The building trades unions, working together with contractors, spend more than \$1 billion per year funding a nationwide network of nearly 1,600 teaching centers. The industry understands the benefits of skilled workforce and is willing to pay to teach its workers.

There is no reason why apprenticeships should be limited to the trades. CEOs across the financial services, information technology and business services industries have expressed interest in expanding the apprenticeship model. By encouraging wide adoption of apprenticeships across many sectors, the federal government can help change the perception that apprenticeships are only for the trades and expand the model into other industries.



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Support for apprenticeships as a means to success should also come from higher education. Community colleges and universities best serve their students when they educate them in the skills they need to succeed.

Demand-driven, experienced-based education is not new. It is commonly used to varying degrees in the health care and hospitality programs. Incorporating apprenticeships into two- and four-year degree programs would offer students a combination of traditional learning and skills-based learning.

Throughout his career, President Trump has seen firsthand the success of apprenticeship programs in the building trades. Throughout his campaign, as he met with a countless number of Americans, President Trump repeated his commitment to expand job opportunities here in America. Apprenticeships will be one of the ways that President Trump will deliver on his commitment.

The president knows that apprenticeship programs offer demand-based skills and good, stable jobs with reduced or no student debt. And the president knows that apprenticeship programs offer the best way of reducing the skills gap.

Alex Acosta is U.S. secretary of labor.

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