ViewPoint: Let's bring tech into the 21st century

Marybeth Campbell is the executive director of SkillWorks: Partners for a Productive Workforce.

In Greater Boston, we often point to our robust innovation economy as a basis of our success and a reason for our relatively quick exit from the Great Recession. Low unemployment rates, nearly $7 billion in new construction, and 60,000 jobs added in three years since 2014 serve as evidence.

But something else has changed, too. Boston today has 30,000 more residents than it did three years ago, 20 percent more foreign-born residents than in 2000, and today, with a 53 percent non-white population, we are a majority-minority city. For all our success, we fail to connect these new residents with opportunities the new economy provides.

The result is a labor market that benefits neither jobseeker nor employer. In the IT sector, there are a stunning 17 jobs posted for every qualified candidate. The sector, which accounts for 156,000 (4%) of the state's jobs, cuts across industries like health care, manufacturing, and financial services, in addition to our growing tech firms. But IT is also troublingly homogenous, with a 35 percent female and 25 percent racial or ethnic minority workforce.

So are we looking in the wrong places for workers, sending the wrong messages or failing to prepare our potential workers? All of the above. Employers say they want nimble, creative workers who think critically, solve problems and communicate effectively, but surveys find half their candidates fall short in those skills. We clamor for a diverse workforce, but in our state's computer science and IT programs, women make up 21 percent of graduates, and African American and Latino/a students just 11 percent each.

The onus to diversify our talent pool is equal parts on the employer, the jobseeker and our training and education institutions. To create the workforce that keeps us competitive as a world-wide hub for innovation and growth, it is imperative that we all do our part. Our training and education programs must keep pace with our changing economy and better align classroom concepts and required skills. We need more internships for students from high school on, and to include youth who are disconnected from school and work. As

interns, young people develop job skills and create connections with potential employers.

Lastly, we need to create a more seamless and effective means for employers to reach beyond the traditional pipelines and into talent pools that have been long overlooked. The Boston Foundation and SkillWorks, a local workforce funder collaborative, recently pledged $10 million to workforce development for the next five years. They have invested in programs like Year Up, Resilient Coders, and more recently Hack.Diversity and a new Cyber Warrior Academy that offer internships and job opportunities for young adults who might otherwise fall outside traditional hiring pipelines in our four-year institutions. The Boston Private Industry Council and SkillWorks also launched TechHire Boston, an employer-led consortium of IT/Tech companies working together to diversify our talent pipeline for the IT/Tech sectors. Backing this effort is a $1 million investment with SkillWorks, the City of Boston and Mayor's Office.

These investments themselves are important, and the partnerships they engender enhance their impact. As funders, we are asking employers, funders, training programs and the community at large to work with us to support and implement effective workforce solutions.

Marybeth Campbell is the executive director of SkillWorks: Partners for a Productive Workforce.