



RECAP: SOLUTIONS 2020 FUTURE OF WORK POLICY WORKING GROUP MAY 2019



Business Forward conducted a *Solutions 2020* Future of Work Policy Working Group briefing on Thursday, May 9, 2019 led by Al Fitzpayne, Executive Director of the Future of Work Initiative at the Aspen Institute, and Massachusetts State Senator Eric Lesser.

The group focused on the rise of automation in the workforce and how 21st century legislation can best prepare us for the future of work. Following feedback and insights from group participants, the working group produced its first Issue Brief outlining the challenges and pointing the way to policy solutions.

Perspective from an Expert

Fitzpayne began the call by highlighting how the rise of new technology may impact the future of work in more significant ways than prior waves of automation. He emphasized that the composition of jobs in the American economy have changed dramatically, while noting that the changes experienced in the 21st century workforce may be deeper, faster, broader and more disruptive than in the past.

“The convergence of artificial intelligence, machine learning, data availability, improved computing power suggests that the impact on our workforce could be more profound and happen faster than what we’ve experienced in previous economic transitions.”

Previous Policy to Improve Career Skills

Fitzpayne noted how previous investments in education and a safety net provided opportunities for American workers to adjust to periods of unemployment while improving their skills and remaining competitive in a changing workforce. Pointing to programs such as mandatory high school, the GI Bill, the Manpower Development Act, and other work-loss protection acts, Fitzpayne articulated how the government was able to prepare workers to embrace the opportunity of new technologies. He argued that American policymakers must step up now in new ways to invest in workforce training to prepare for technological changes in the economy, citing statistics which rank America low on worker-training investment globally.

Massachusetts Case Study

Massachusetts state Senator Eric Lesser discussed his personal experience working on these issues in the state legislature, sharing his perspective as a senator who represents a district heavily dependent on manufacturing. He made a specific point to discuss how geography affects the future of work.

“Something we’ve seen in Massachusetts is the economic disparities are now a very prevalent around geography ... the economy in Western Massachusetts where I’m from is much more similar to the economy in Michigan or Ohio or Pennsylvania than it is to the economy in Boston or San Francisco or New York City. And so we need to do more, for example, in investments in high speed rail lines, which would put a lot of people to work but also help bridge some of the growing gaps we’re seeing between geographies.”

Working Group Feedback

Working group members provided feedback on the draft issue brief and offered insights with recommended focus areas for the working group moving forward.

Cliff Brush from Oregon asked about the changing dynamic between employers valuing skills and experience versus a college degree. Lesser discussed his personal experience serving western Massachusetts, noting the debt crisis in higher education. He described the training programs run by large corporations such as Mass Mutual, and how the state has benefitted from having these skill training programs, regardless of a person’s level of educational attainment.

Later in the conversation, the topic of developing and then prioritizing skills over credentials resurfaced. Business Forward’s Ed Meier discussed his work with a Dallas-based education nonprofit where students are incentivized, and even credentialed, with digital badges based on the skills they are able to develop.

Rhonda Binda, CEO of Venture Smarter, directed the conversation to the increasing prospect of automation, and what it means for those who are less technologically capable. Changes in the type of automation, the growth of a digital divide based on age, and supporting equity through expanded technological education will drive the debate about the future of work in our country.

With the help of more than 60 of America's most respected companies, Business Forward is making it easier for more than 100,000 business leaders from across America to advise Washington on how to create jobs and accelerate our economy. More than 650 mayors, governors, members of Congress, and senior Administration officials have participated in our briefings.

Business leaders who have participated in our briefings have seen their suggestions implemented in the Affordable Care Act, the JOBS Act, the Clean Power Plan, the Toxic Substances Control Act, three trade agreements, and the President's budgets. Many have also shared their recommendations with their representatives in Congress and through phone calls, op-eds, and interviews with local media. Ninety-eight out of 100 business leaders who have participated in a Business Forward briefing would be interested in participating in another one.

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