

# **Viewpoint: The shared opportunity of a tight labor market**

May 15, 2019, 4:23pm EDT

By almost any broad measure, Greater Boston is an economic powerhouse. Our unemployment rate is low, we're creating jobs at a rapid pace, and we're building out one of the nation's strongest high-tech economies.

But scratch the surface, look beneath the big numbers and away from the cranes, and we're faced with the reality that Boston's boom is far from universal.

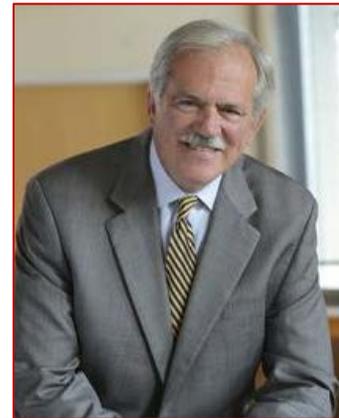
Greater Boston's economy has a history of heavily rewarding those with skills and education and harshly punishing those without, and the numbers bear that out. A 2018 Boston Indicators report finds Boston is adding households at the top and bottom of the income scale and losing its middle class. Our income gap is still among the nation's worst. The Mayor's Office of Workforce Development reports that nearly half of the people in the city earn less than \$35,000 a year, a city in which median rents are rising. And while the city unemployment rate is low, jobs are not equally, nor equitably, distributed through the neighborhoods.

We can do better to support a more cohesive workforce and education system that will, in turn, help our jobseekers gain better access to good jobs and simultaneously help our businesses compete.

We can create opportunities for young adults, the under-unemployed and new and native residents, who are all too often underemployed or unemployed, by providing training programs that benefit jobseekers and serve business needs.

We can create pipelines that connect these new streams of talent to local businesses.

We can, because in some places, we already are. In corners throughout the region, there are organizations like Hack. Diversity, Jewish Vocational Service, SkillWorks, Resilient Coders and others who are developing a next-generation workforce and connecting it to a savvy network of businesses. We've told this exciting "Next Gen" story recently in the "Catapult Papers."



Paul Grogan  
President and CEO of the  
Boston Foundation.

What we need, though, is the ability to scale those kinds of programs into systems. We need a catapult. Project Catapult is a jointly proposed workforce model from The Boston Foundation and SkillWorks that we hope will propel our untapped labor supply into targeted opportunities for good jobs and sustained careers, which in turn will also help business gain a competitive edge. It's based on the concept that systems level change will only happen if businesses and workers are willing to invest in workforce development. And it will only happen if we are diligent about identifying what works — and doubling down on those best bets.



Jerry Rubin  
President and CEO of  
Jewish Vocational Service Inc.

The Catapult model is simple: invest in the exponential growth of Greater Boston's most effective, market-driven training and education organizations in partnership with the region's most savvy businesses in order to leverage the region's potential for sustaining talent. It's not a static goal — we need to reward innovation, incentivize coalition building and encourage continuous improvement. And we need to understand that the most successful models are not always the cheapest, and invest in workforce development in ways that respect both the needs of the individual worker and the needs of the employer. One-size-fits-all approaches are doomed to fail.

Doing this, and doing this right, requires that we all put some skin in the game and put our money where our hearts are. Scaling effective workforce development requires financing to build capacity. It needs the government, philanthropic and business capital to invest in HR staffing, effective technology and create strategic partnerships. It also needs the investment of time, resources and skills to create and advance policy solutions that will make workforce development at scale possible for the long term.

We know what works, and have models to follow for many of these elements, but we need to activate them. While Catapult is working now to raise the philanthropic capital to support the effort, but philanthropy alone won't be enough. It will require the cooperation of businesses savvy enough to see the opportunity with the resources to be a partner in the work. In a tight labor market, and even when it softens, it's an investment that is bound to pay off for worker and employer alike.

*Paul Grogan is the President and CEO of the Boston Foundation; Jerry Rubin is President and CEO of Jewish Vocational Service Inc.*