

Technology professionals step up to STEM the gap



In the face of a looming shortfall of science, technology, engineering, and math graduates, Cisco employees are embracing a bold challenge to excite students about career possibilities.

If you've never set foot in a research laboratory, can you know what it's like to work there? If you've never met an engineer, is it possible to imagine being one?

For most of today's youth, the answer is no.

Studies show that nearly two-thirds of American teenagers are ignoring science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) careers simply due to lack of awareness. In fact, only 17 percent of grade 12 students demonstrate a genuine interest in STEM subjects. Yet, seven of the ten fastest-growing occupations over the next decade are projected to be in those fields.

It's a dichotomy that must be addressed, says Patrick Finn, senior vice president, Cisco® U.S. Public Sector.

"If we can't fix our supply and demand problem related to STEM talent, our competitiveness as a country is going to be impacted," says Finn, noting that every profession is going to have a technology bent to it moving forward.

"American businesses don't want to be in a position where we have to look outside the U.S. to fill those positions," he adds. "The only way to avoid that is to ensure tomorrow's workforce is equipped with the necessary knowledge."

Nationwide call

The alarm bell has sounded all the way to the top. Last year the White House issued a call to generate large-scale, innovative solutions to the STEM education challenge through a new organization called US2020. The objective is to match one million STEM mentors to students by the year 2020, with a particular focus on engaging girls, under-represented minorities, and children in communities that are economically challenged.

As one of five US2020 founding partners, Cisco is stepping up to the challenge with a bold goal to have 20 percent of its workforce volunteering 20 hours or more in STEM mentoring each year by 2020.

"It's really a movement that's sweeping the nation," says Jessica Graham, community relations manager, Cisco, noting that initial feedback from employees and partners is positive. "Together we are all chipping in to contribute this massive level of civic engagement that takes us back to that first spark of curiosity so long ago that pushed us into our own careers."



Cisco responds

US2020 is an open challenge to all professionals to come up with unique ways for getting youth excited about STEM. How they go about it varies from one-day workshops to guest speaking engagements to sponsoring creative competitions and more.

At Cisco, several initiatives are already under way. Earlier this year, a group of women engineers took part in National Engineering Week, giving 70 middle school girls a glimpse into how cutting-edge technologies are developed. Cisco employees across departments and positions are also volunteering through programs such as the Networking Academy, Cyber Patriot Competition, Million Women Mentors, and Citizen Schools, a national non-profit organization that facilitates in-school apprenticeships.

Kimone Gooden, business development manager, Cisco Global Business Services, is one of more than 125 volunteers from Cisco who have stepped out of their comfort zone as technology professionals to become mentors for Citizen Schools.

“It can be very intimidating to enter a classroom for the first time, but once you get over the initial hurdle, students are like sponges,” says Gooden.

Igniting a passion for STEM careers in young people is one thing. Equally important is the need to mentor and sponsor them so they carry that excitement into the workplace as solid leaders, says Finn. Right now, only 40 percent of American students who start out in STEM fields actually complete their degrees and go on to STEM-related jobs.

“If you think about other highly-skilled professions like lawyers or doctors, they all have mentoring built right into their curriculum,” he states. “That’s why this call to action is so imperative. If we can increase our engagement, the impact on education, inclusion, and diversity will be absolutely amazing.”

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There is a growing consensus that public-private collaborations are needed in order to scale STEM mentoring. To learn how you and your colleagues can help meet the challenge, visit www.stemconnector.org. For more on available volunteer opportunities, go to www.millionwomenmentors.com or www.citizenschools.org.

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