

By Charlotte West

Human Capital and Talent in an Increasingly Interconnected World

*In 2015, **Byron Auguste** and **Karan Chopra** cofounded Opportunity@Work, a social enterprise based in Washington, D.C., that aims to expand access to career opportunities and remove barriers to hiring and learning. Now chief executive officer of Opportunity@Work, Auguste spent two years in the Obama administration as deputy assistant to the president for economic policy and deputy director of the National Economic Council. Chopra, who is executive vice president at Opportunity@Work, first came to the United States as an international undergraduate from India to study at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Chopra has a long history of social enterprise work as cofounder and director of the Global Agri-Development Company, an agri-food business in sub-Saharan Africa, and cofounder of West Africa Vocational Education (WAVE), a social venture tackling youth unemployment in Nigeria. International Educator spoke with Auguste and Chopra about breaking down barriers between the worlds of work and education, as well as how to think globally about the types of careers we are preparing students for. This interview has been condensed for brevity.*

You've said before that during every major economic shift, a new asset class becomes the basis of productivity, growth, wealth creation, and opportunity. Can you tell us about the asset class that educational institutions and labor markets need to adapt to today and why?

Auguste: In a knowledge economy, which is more than just information, human capital is what becomes the critical asset class as opposed to financial capital. But the main thing is talent. It's human capital. It's research. That comes out of the great universities around the world. These are the critical assets.

And what's more, a lot of the conversation about new technology implicitly says, "It's technology versus people." It suggests that technology replaces people. I think that's a fundamentally flawed way of looking at it. I think it's not actually the technology that is the critical thing. It is the way... that [technology] interacts with human capital through the specific institutions that we have.

To give you example of what I mean, think about our artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning. An enormous amount of that is coming out of great research universities. Higher education already touches that in a very fundamental way.

Then as you think about how it interacts... with the [world of] work, people default far too easily to the assumption that AI is going to sort of commoditize



Byron Auguste

human intelligence and human learning. I see it almost the exact opposite way.

In the knowledge economy, AI's absolute highest value use is to accelerate human learning. It should be suffusing the way we learn in universities and on the job.

What do you think traditional postsecondary schools need to do to remain relevant in a world where everyone will require lifelong learning?

Auguste: I would say number one, understand that whatever the barriers are, the world needs more education, not less. More people need more education, they need it more frequently, and they need it in a greater variety of forms. They won't always need four years at a time. They might only need it two years at a time or six weeks at a time.

Number two, that diversity of how [education] is delivered doesn't need to be feared. I think there's a fear that [higher education institutions] are just turning into component suppliers for companies, turning them into vocational education, as opposed to liberal arts education. I believe that distinction is massively overstated.

Work is solving problems. Work is understanding other people and their perspectives and figuring out collaboratively how to get to a better place. One of the outcomes should be having a meaningful working life. Rightly integrated, the world of work can bring as much

to the learning experience as education can bring to the world of work. You will have students who understand better the why of their learning.

We have a globalized, digitized, and accelerated workplace that will affect every career. How do you think international education professionals should be thinking about educating people for work?

Chopra: If I think of the reason for cofounding the venture that I did in Nigeria, or if I think about the higher education system in Ghana or even in India, the issue [is], how you are equipping individuals with the skills that are needed in a world in which those skills are also constantly changing? Are [higher education institutions] responsive to that?

I think the other dimension to this is in a world that is more interconnected, that is more globalized, you can focus a lot more on the different avenues of work that someone sitting in Accra or in Lagos or somewhere else might take that are not limited by the traditional sectors or the traditional areas of work that have just happened locally.

For example, the IT outsourcing sector in India grew not because the [internet providers] were preparing people for work that was being generated in India. That grew because they thought about demand, not just locally, but globally. So, one of the things for international education professionals to be thinking about is how do we think about what demand for work is, beyond just either kind of local or even the national boundaries of how you [previously] thought about that? If you took a step back and took a more globalized view about how [to prepare human capital], it would open so many more horizons.

At Opportunity@Work, you are focused on the mastery of skills. Can you talk about mastery and its value to community colleges, especially their career centers?

Auguste: Bachelor's degree institutions still have much more prestige. Nursing is a good example that while in theory you could get a job in a hospital with an associate degree, you are probably going to need a bachelor's degree. There's not as much of a wage premium from community college completion as one would necessarily hope given an ability to deliver two years of education.

We believe the key would be to establish a way for your graduates to be judged by how well they have mastered the material

and how well they can apply it. If a community college program is preparing students well, the students will have the ability to show that, employers will hire them, and the data will start to come back.

The world needs more successful learning experiences that can be applied in the world, and we need mechanisms that provide a feedback loop to grow. We believe that it's very possible to do. It can be done through more public appropriation if the data is there. It can be done through the private sector, companies investing more in those institutions.

There are many community college and many other less well-known bachelor's degree programs that have specific expertise that are doing a great job in applied learning. I think there is so much upside to community colleges—if there is the feedback loop where the data and the information say, “Hey, we're doing well and we can get more [funding].” We think that the real thing is to reward and to grow success. That applies to every level of education, but I think most importantly for community colleges and for the very large number of four-year institutions that don't benefit from a great deal of reputation and selectivity.



Karan Chopra

A 2014 Gallup poll asked college graduates about what factors at colleges or technical schools help to produce engaged employees on a fulfilling career track. How would you have answered that question?

Auguste: The Gallup results, as I remember them, said that having a mentor and having an internship were the two most important things, and I think that is very consistent with what we're seeing. It's a true guidance, and ability to sort through that guidance, to discover your own path. It's incredibly important. What we've seen is very consistent with those Gallup results. ... The lesson [that] should be taken [is that] they are highly complementary. This was a poll of graduates. They already all benefited from opportunities that those who weren't able to matriculate and graduate from higher education institutions did not have. But it's a conflict between those opportunities—of which there should be more—and that guidance and work experience.

Chopra: I think it ties to the theme of breaking down the boundaries between learning and working. [It] has to be seamlessly integrated to all traces of the journey. ■

Read more from Byron Auguste and Karan Chopra in “Lifelong Learning: Higher Education for a World of Speed and Scale” on page 28.