

The Berkshire Eagle



U.S. Rep. Richard E. Neal, D-Springfield, left, and Niraj Shah, co-founder, CEO and co-Chairman of Wayfair, chat onstage Wednesday at the Economic Development Policy Summit at Berkshire Community College in Pittsfield.

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'Bridge that skills gap': At summit, leaders talk unlocking Berkshires' economic potential

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By Tony Dobrowolski, The Berkshire Eagle

PITTSFIELD — Boyd Technologies of Lee recently hired a seamstress who worked at the former Country Curtains to run an ultrasonic sewing line. While that might seem like a mismatch between job skills and professional requirements, it's not.

This person's previous employment history, productivity level and approach to work outweighed the lack of high-level work skills. The seamstress got the job.

"We can train," said Boyd Technologies president and CEO Stephen Boyd.

Ways to bridge the skills gap, a gaping hole in both the local and national economies, were discussed Wednesday when U.S. Rep. Richard E. Neal hosted an Economic Development Policy Summit at Berkshire Community College. Panel discussions on community development tax

incentives and workforce development took place along with a back-and-forth discussion between Neal and Wayfair co-founder and CEO Niraj Shah, who grew up in Pittsfield.

Wayfair's grand opening of its long-awaited sales and service center in Pittsfield, which is expected to bring 300 jobs to the Berkshires within the next two years, is scheduled for Oct. 10.

Shah, the event's keynote speaker, spent most of his speaking time answering questions posed by Neal. Asked to describe the types of job skills that Wayfair was looking for from its Pittsfield employees, Shah's comments mirrored the ones that Boyd would express later in the program.

"If you have people with core skills, we can train them," Shah said. "If you don't have core skills it's hard to be a member of our company."

Matching prospective local employees with the jobs that are available in the Berkshires was discussed during the panel discussion on workforce development, along with existing job-training initiatives and theories on how to better connect employers with prospective employees.

The Berkshire unemployment rate of 3.1 percent is low enough that it technically signals "full employment," said Heather Boulger, executive director of the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board in Pittsfield. But as of Wednesday, there were still 1,457 open positions in the Berkshires that needed to be filled, she said.

"We're trying to bridge that skills gap," Boulger said.

To help unemployed and underemployed Berkshire residents find work, Boulger said, the Workforce Board has initiated training programs in advanced manufacturing and engineering, health care and social services, and hospitality and tourism.

"We'll be announcing next week that we will be receiving some funding for those three sectors," Boulger said. "There's more to come on that."

Jonathan Butler, president and CEO of 1Berkshires, the county's state designated economic development agency, outlined efforts his organization has undertaken to bring people from outside the county to the Berkshires to fill some of those open positions. 1Berkshire recently began a jobs portal that listed 300 full-time open positions in the Berkshires, and 200 of those jobs were filled during the portal's first year of operation, Butler said. To be listed on the portal, those jobs required an annual salary of at least \$40,000, he said.

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Several Berkshire-based businesses are looking to expand, Butler said, but are restricted from doing so due to the skill level in the local workforce, he said.

"We need to bring that talent in to participate in our economy," Butler said.

Berkshire Community College President Ellen Kennedy said the college is currently instituting a new 15-credit program that will provide student internships at local businesses. "Let us know what you need," said Kennedy, referring to the employers in the audience.

Immigration was another workforce topic that generated significant discussion. Butler said the immigrant community in the Berkshires is the county's fastest growing population sector. Neal,

who chairs the House Ways and Means Committee, said immigration reform is needed at the national level.

"I'm not for open borders," he said. "But we need a system for people to be in this country. When (Barack) Obama said get in line and learn English, I think he was right about that.

"My grandparents wanted to make America great, too," said Neal, who is of Irish descent. "They just wanted a chance."

Shah, whose father emigrated to the United States from India, said immigration policies need to be "more friendly" than they are today.

"When someone comes here, buys a home and puts money back into the American economy, why would you want that person to leave?" he said.

Boyd told the story of an immigrant from El Salvador who had gone to medical school there but was packing boxes at Boyd Technologies.

"I said, 'Why are you here?'" Boyd recalled. "She said, 'I'm just happy to be in a place where bullets aren't whizzing around my head.'"

Both Neal and Shah said they favored global rather than nationalistic trade policies, as long as they were fair. The conversation also drifted to climate change.

"It's beyond me how anybody can deny the science of climate change," Neal said. "I think we're better off embracing the science of the challenge."

Tony Dobrowolski can be reached at tdobrowolski@berkshireeagle.com or 413-496-6224.