

Skills Gap or Confidence Gap?

Why Latin American youth need more than just technical training

By **Leo Martellotto**, President of Junior Achievement Americas and **Jeff Hittner**, Lead Strategist of the Crossland Group.

Among business leaders, there is a growing chorus to solve the ever-elusive skills gap for young people in Latin America and the Caribbean. We say “elusive,” because oftentimes what is presumed to be a gap in skills turns out to be something else entirely. In our roles working at the forefront of youth issues in the region, we speak regularly with young people. In those conversations, we are often struck by a painful, consistent reality: When asked, “What do you want to do in life? What is your dream?” the most frequent response is not “doctor,” “football player,” or even “millionaire.” Instead, what we hear is, “No one has ever asked me that before.”

When the phrase skills gap is thrown around, there is an assumption that we’re referring to a mismatch in technical needs between employers and our youth. This could be computer skills or plumbing skills, but its focus is precise—it is a technical skills gap. But listen more closely, and you hear a different story from employers. In one

example, a senior Microsoft executive in Ecuador commented to us, “Our young people, particularly our vulnerable youth, have low self-esteem. They give up quickly, believing they are worthless—even if they have technical expertise—and this prevents them from becoming leaders and having aspirations for success. We need to support them!”

At Junior Achievement Americas, we refer to the problem described by the Microsoft executive as the confidence gap. It is a skills gap, for sure, but it is comprised of soft skills, such as communication and teamwork, emotional intelligence, writing and leadership capabilities, and an authentic willingness to try. Whether it’s an inability to express oneself on a CV or in an interview, a lack of capacity to work closely with superiors in a first job, or having low aspirations for growth and development once in the workforce, without these core skills, young people are almost guaranteed to suffer lost opportunities throughout their early careers.

“ The young people I see coming to our offices have no long-term plan or focus. We need to prepare them better. ”

Tourism Executive,
Quito Tourism Board

Don't Leave It to the Experts

While addressing the technical skills gap requires a collaborative effort from a diverse set of stakeholder groups—businesses and schools, governments, and international organizations like Junior Achievement—the confidence gap, on the other hand, is one that can be addressed immediately by everyone in a community.

The following are five simple ways anyone can start playing a role in their communities to address the confidence gap:

1. Start asking the right questions.

We need to connect our youth to their dreams. That begins with asking them to imagine those dreams – planting the seeds of possibility inside their heads and hearts. It's as easy as it sounds. Start with your family, and then extend the question to other young people who are a part of your life.

2. Share your story.

Create the space for sharing stories and connecting with young people by describing the dreams you had, the challenges you faced, and the opportunities you took to become who you are.

3. Become a mentor.

While there are many formal volunteer mentoring programs out there (for

example, Junior Achievement manages corporate mentoring programs in more than twenty countries in Latin America), when it comes to soft skills, you can act as a role model to a young person almost anywhere. Approach a school, connect with parents—there are so many ways to build opportunities to create impact together.

4. Encourage your children to volunteer

Building skills such as teamwork, compassion, and cooperation are critical to employers, and engaging with others, particularly those with different challenges and backgrounds, is a fantastic way to learn soft skills. Consider opportunities for your children to volunteer at a church, a hospital, or with the elderly in their communities.

5. Raise the awareness

In your job or in a role you play in the community, take the time to talk to your colleagues or peers about the issue. Point them in the direction of useful resources on the subject, or give them tips about how to get involved. The more conversations we have, the greater the awareness becomes, and the more people we have to help close the debilitating confidence gap.

We all have an opportunity to contribute to the growth of our region by inspiring and empowering our youth. And it begins with something as simple as asking a question. By starting with these five tips for getting involved today, you'll be helping to reshape the outcomes for tomorrow—not only for the good of our youth ... but for the long-term prosperity of our region.



Leonardo Martellotto

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