

# CRAIN'S NEW YORK BUSINESS

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## How Amazon can build a talent pipeline in its new Queens home

Local residents have the grit to succeed, but need a long-term commitment from the company

Gail O. Mellow

Christopher Hanway



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Local residents have the grit to succeed, but need a long-term commitment from the company

Amazon's decision to come to Long Island City, and its promise of more than 25,000 jobs, will only magnify changes to this once bustling industrial area that is already undergoing a major transformation.

The question that our Queens institutions—LaGuardia Community College and youth-services provider Riis Settlement House—are asking is how to welcome Amazon while simultaneously preserving the diversity and vibrancy of our community, where people of all ages and disparate socioeconomic backgrounds live and work. And the question for Amazon, and for city and state leaders that have given the company significant financial incentives to locate here, is simple: Who benefits?

There is much to be gained by Amazon and Long Island City alike. Yet, too often moments like these are squandered.

To reap the full benefits, and to ensure they are shared, we must think bigger, smarter and longer-term. This moment, as Amazon places its bet on Long Island City, creates an opportunity to reimagine where and how tech talent is created. If we don't, Amazon will likely turn to traditional talent creators—MIT, Stanford, UT Austin, Carnegie Mellon and the like—to meet its growing workforce needs.

It starts in Amazon's new backyard. At local colleges including LaGuardia and in public housing projects where Riis Settlement House is located, New Yorkers seek to land well-paying jobs that allow them to demonstrate their talents while making better lives for themselves and their families. These neighborhood residents—incredibly diverse, largely low-income, often first in their family to attend college—have the grit and determination to succeed but need the high-quality classroom learning and substantive out-of-classroom experiences that can ready them for Amazon employment.

With deep and sustained partnerships, Amazon could harness untapped talent among the thousands who live, work and study within just a few miles of its new headquarters.

How can this be done?

First, Amazon needs to make an enduring investment in the local education and training of its future workforce. It means an ongoing commitment to collaborating with and supporting educational institutions. Job fairs and résumé workshops are not enough. We know companies require short-term results. However, nurturing a community of talent requires a long-term perspective. Building talent, particularly diverse talent from largely underrepresented communities, entails a generational commitment.

Second, LaGuardia Community College and other area colleges must look at the full spectrum of employment opportunities at Amazon and begin to match up, in granular detail, its workforce needs with academic programs. A corporate headquarters requires not only coders and programmers but everything from building security to event planners to

accountants. If \$150,000 is the average annual salary, there must be \$75,000 jobs for which a doctorate in computer science is not required.

Third, students require internships to expand their skill-sets and learn how to succeed in a corporate setting. Unfortunately, low-income students are often locked out of nonpaying internships. Amazon should blow open its doors, moving away from its usual recruiting pools and creating learning opportunities for nontraditional potential hires to become part of the emerging tech ecosystem. The future that Amazon may create could set the bar for other companies that have yet to employ sufficient numbers of women or people of color.

Fourth, let's rethink what we mean by "infrastructure." There's lots of talk about the pressure Amazon will place on our subways. But what if we paid attention to the investment in human capital that made Amazon interested in coming to New York City? What if Amazon, joined by the city and state, reframes what we mean by infrastructure spending and makes substantial investments in building talent? What if Amazon's employees regularly share their knowledge of the tech ecosystem by collaborating with our faculty to inform curricula and shape programs? What if Amazon holds seminars for local business owners to learn new strategies for digital use in product manufacturing or marketing?

Amazon prides itself on being willing to take risks—"innovating requires failing." Now is an opportunity to take some chances in sourcing their talent. "Thinking big" means tossing away old assumptions of where great employees come from.

Sure, Amazon should recruit in Austin and Boston. But it ought to build a talent pipeline right in its new neighborhood of Long Island City. We are waiting with open arms.

*Gail O. Mellow is president of By LaGuardia Community College. Christopher Hanway is executive director of the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement.*

Inline Play

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