

We Need a National STARTUP-SKILLING Program Now!

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Synopsis

To prepare for our post-outbreak job market, we need to help American small business owners prepare themselves and their employees for a new economy — not just with re-skilling or up-skilling programs, but also with STARTUP-SKILLING programs that help small business owners think, learn, iterate, pivot, crowdsource, and move like startups. This is the key to personal and business resilience in a world of unending disruption — and a game-changing opportunity for unprecedented economic inclusion.

Full Testimony

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I am the CEO of Cintrifuse, an organization committed to building a leading innovation economy in Greater Cincinnati. We provide services to hundreds of entrepreneurs and manage a 38,000 sq ft co-working space in Cincinnati’s urban core. We also unlock innovation through \$115 million in invested capital from corporations such as P&G, Kroger, Western & Southern, and EW Scripps. As for me, I’ve launched and sold a tech startup and recently served as Global Head of Digital for Nestle.

I have just one core message that I’d like to share with you today: the best way to help small business owners thrive in this uncertain world is to help them think and act like startups — the entrepreneurs who are disrupting every part of our economy and, in the process, creating new jobs, game-changing technologies, and new, better ways to live and work.

When I say startups, I don’t necessarily mean Silicon Valley. Or Ivy League entrepreneurs raising millions in venture capital. I’m referring to the new generation of entrepreneurs taking on big, unsolved problems... in every sector of our society ... and turning them on their head.

Many of these startup founders are women and minorities. And they’re coming from well beyond the East and West Coasts; a huge number are stepping up throughout the Midwest. They are harnessing digital technology, connectivity, and "distributed everything" to create new business models, new solutions, and new companies designed for the age of disruption.

Which is a point I want to underscore: we ARE living in an age of unending disruption – in which economic, social, health-related shocks — are going to become more common.

Some people call this a VUCA world — volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. A VUCA world requires VUCA leadership — precisely what a startup mindset enables.

To be clear, there are urgent needs that small business owners need help with right now. Paycheck protection. Access to capital. Streamlined regulations and policies. They’re all critical and necessary. But

we must also look beyond the present to a future that is going to be even more demanding than the moment we're living in today. And do so with urgency!

Many people talk about re-skilling – or even UP-skilling -- as a way to prepare for the new economy. Neither is enough! We also need STARTUP-SKILLING -- teaching and empowering small business owners to think and act like startups in times of crisis AND in times of growth.

What does this mean? A startup mindset is different than a conventional leadership mindset. It prizes speed, rapid prototyping, constant iteration, and failing fast to learn fast. It is obsessed with data, what to see in it, and how to exploit it. It's digital, and it thrives on pivots.

STARTUP-SKILLING should become a national priority — led by the SBA and involving corporations, universities and startup ecosystems. The Kaufmann Foundation has called for the creation of an “e-Corps” — a Peace Corps of sorts for digital natives. I love that idea, but let's focus it disproportionately on STARTUP-SKILLING for small businesses. And get it going NOW.

What does STARTUP-SKILLING look like?

First, it's about showing small business owners how they can apply startup thinking, technologies and practices to their own ventures.

For example, at Cintrifuse we hosted a program called *Nitro!* in partnership with JP Morgan Chase. Over ONE weekend, we “startup-skilled” several dozen minority-led businesses — entrepreneurs who are vastly under-served and under-resourced throughout every community. We gave them access to mentors. We showed them how to leverage technology. We brought in Google. We taught them the principles of startup leadership.

This should be a signature SBA program. We need thousands of NITRO! Weekends across America. Every weekend!! Not just to support small business owners, but to turbocharge our support for minority and women-led small businesses in particular! We also need to support other existing efforts like Mortar, the minority-focused startup accelerator you heard last year.

We're also seeing movement in “micro-credentialing” aimed at urban and rural areas. Miami University in Ohio is one such school developing more accessible micro-credentialing targeted at starting a new enterprise and including basic skills in accounting, finance, and marketing. Faculty are deployed well beyond the Ivory Tower to the actual communities in need.

Second, it's about learning from Digital Natives — the kids who've grown up being digital. With sponsorship from our corporate partners, Cintrifuse is sponsoring a “virtual entrepreneurial program” for high school and college students — as we speak, in fact!

We targeted 50 students. We got 100. They're developing startup ideas to help address pressing challenges created by Covid, by Sustainability, and by Social Justice issues. We're challenging them to explore ways in which radically more transparent supply chains – driven by breakthrough innovations in areas like traceability – might be part of a better future.

In other words, they're taking on big unsolved problems. And they're thinking beyond big companies and tech startups to the role small businesses can play in our own back yard.

Third, it's about "mobilizing" and "re-platforming" small business services.

I spent hours before this testimony reviewing dozens of government and SBA digital properties, apps, and more. I've applied for PPP help. I've read web comments. I'm convinced the SBA needs a digital startup infusion.

Why not build an "open innovation" platform to crowd-source solutions? And why not take greater advantage of audience-rich "big tech" – Google, Microsoft, Amazon. Facebook, for example, has more than three billion users including TENS OF MILLIONS of small business owners. This platform is taking heat for reasons I'll refrain from discussing, but why not invite them to co-develop a next generation hub for small business services and startup-skilling. Not a page or an ad campaign, but SBA.com on steroids. What a win-win!

Final observation: I truly believe there's little distinction between a tech startup and a mom and pop small business. They are both based on an idea, a problem that needs to be solved, an entrepreneurial spirit, and the desire to take a shot and carve your own path. Whether we're talking about scalable technology or small-town service, we're talking about the same thing: businesses built on the ingenuity, passion and persistence of people who simply want to make our country better by finding a better way. That's American entrepreneurialism.

We have a "pivot moment" to both support small businesses in crisis AND to accelerate their ability to think and act like the startups that are changing the world.

My bumper-sticker? **Let's STARTUP-SKILL America!!**

If we meet this moment, we will inspire, grow and unleash **the most diverse, innovative and resilient generation of entrepreneurs in American history**. Thank you.