

**“Lesson Earned” Podcast
Strada Education Network
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Season 3, Episode 7: Salesforce’s Ebony Beckwith on taking a different path

TRANSCRIPT

Host Ben Wildavsky, Strada Education Network

[00:00:01] Hi, I'm Ben Wildavsky.

Host Aimée Eubanks Davis, Braven

[00:00:02] And I'm Aimée Eubanks Davis.

Ben Wildavsky

[00:00:05] And this is “Lessons Earned.”

Aimée Eubanks Davis

[00:00:10] Today, Salesforce’s Chief Philanthropy Officer Ebony Beckwith.

(sound clip)

Ebony Beckwith [00:00:15] We all have a role to play. We all need to find ways to bring in diverse talent, not because it's good for business — because it is — but because it's the right thing to do.

Ben Wildavsky [00:00:25] From Strada Education Network, welcome to “Lessons Earned: Putting Education to Work.”

We have a lot of conversations on this podcast about how we can improve workforce development in this country. And there are thousands of academics and policy wonks who have really good ideas about how exactly to do that. But without buy-in from employers, those ideas are just that, they're ideas. So of course we also like to talk to the employers themselves and see how those ideas are really playing out on the ground. We've talked to Amazon and McDonald's and today we're talking to Salesforce about what we can learn from their particularly innovative approach to workforce development.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:01:15] Salesforce is one of the biggest tech companies in the country, and as the company has grown, so has its workforce. Right now, there are more than half a million jobs in the Salesforce ecosystem, and that number is supposed to be 4.2 million by 2024. Ben, that's a lot of jobs. And they're filling those roles in a way that's not just good for Salesforce. It's good for people.

Ben Wildavsky [00:01:42] That's right. Because their approach to workforce development is really centered around opportunity, whether it's by working with organizations like yours, like Braven or Year Up or through their own workforce development initiatives, Salesforce is trying to provide employment opportunities to people who just might not otherwise have them.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:02:02] At the center of a lot of that important work is Ebony Beckwith. Ebony has been with Salesforce for over a decade and she's now their chief of philanthropy and CEO of the Salesforce Foundation. We wanted to talk to Ebony about how employers can create employment opportunities for overlooked talent. And we also wanted to hear about her own personal story and see how her winding path through education and the workforce influences her work today. But I couldn't help but be a little bit starstruck in the beginning of our conversation.

Ebony, welcome to "Lessons Earned." As you may know from your team, I'm a fan girl of yours. As a Black woman, I'm always looking especially for role models who are in significant roles for inspiration, who identify as women and people of color. And then when we were brainstorming for this season's podcast of an employer to try to talk to, you were at the very top of my list of people who I was really hoping to have a conversation with. So welcome. We're super excited to have you.

Ebony Beckwith [00:03:12] Thank you. It's really exciting to be here.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:03:14] So let's just dig right in. I saw on your LinkedIn that you went to Lowell, which is to my understanding, but I'm not a Bay Area person, a very academically selective high school in San Francisco. And then you went right into the workforce. I would imagine that many people from your high school would have gone right into college. What made you to make the decision to go right into the workforce?

Ebony Beckwith [00:03:40] Don't get my mother started on this one. I'm like, where is my mother to tell her side of the story? But no, it's a really interesting question because, yes, a lot of my peers did go straight from high school to college. And I think, you know, it's an interesting question, too, because I think many people assume that once you reach executive level that most executives had a careful plan to get them where they are. And I can tell you that my path definitely wasn't linear. And instead of, like you said, going to college straight after high school, I went to junior college, many different junior colleges around the Bay Area. And then I worked to support myself. And I think that's honestly where a lot of my passion for workforce development stems from, just from my nontraditional path. And eventually I felt like I had gone as far as I could professionally without a four-year degree, which at the time was a requirement to reach the executive level. So I was hitting that proverbial glass ceiling. And today it's a totally different world, but 20 years ago, I knew it was something I needed if I wanted to go any further. So that's when I decided to pursue a degree in computer science. And I remember exactly where I was seeing an ad at a bus stop, and I felt like this decision was literally right in front of me. So that's kind of how it all happened. It definitely wasn't that straight path.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:05:01] Right. So that was 20 years ago. What would you say to young people today? Would you recommend that path as people think about what their plans are post high school graduation?

Ebony Beckwith [00:05:13] I think it all depends. You know, some people aren't ready to go straight from high school to college. Some people want to do that. Some people take a gap year. Some people have or are really developed in certain skills and don't need to do that. And I'm hoping that also the workforce is changing. You know, 20, 40 years ago, you didn't need to be, need a degree to be an I.T. technician. You needed the skills and experience. I'm hoping that as corporations kind of get more astute and aware that they start waving that degree requirement or adding language in and that's more, you know, equivalent experience required. And then we will allow for badges, degrees, credentials,

what have you, whatever it is that you have. But we accept you as you are. And there are ways to tell if people have the skills or not. Right? So I just, I don't know. I feel like it should be opened up for both.

Ben Wildavsky [00:06:11] Sure. Well, so let's go to like when you got really got started at Salesforce. So you began your career at Salesforce and technology business operations, which makes sense. No, as I understand it, your degree was in computer information systems, but then you kind of gradually moved over into the world of philanthropy and community engagement, and I wonder if you could just tell us how that came about.

Ebony Beckwith [00:06:35] I definitely call myself an accidental philanthropist because most of my career was spent in technology organizations, whether it be doing Unix or back ups and file transfers and working in data centers or, I just, I love the technical world. When I but when I came to Salesforce, I worked for the first female CIO and it was actually at that time where I got to merge my technology background and my passion for philanthropy, that I didn't know was philanthropy. And what happened was I was the lead when Salesforce hired our first three Year Up interns. Now we've had over 650 to date. But it was that partnership that really set the foundation for the role I have now and actually our workforce development programs today.

Ben Wildavsky [00:07:29] Yeah, well, gosh, that's actually a perfect connection because we just have the founder of Year Up, Gerald Chertavian on the podcast.

Ebony Beckwith [00:07:36] Oh, Gerald!

Ben Wildavsky [00:07:38] Yeah. It was a great conversation and, you know, he was talking about how Year Up, it calls itself a work-first program, you know, meaning their big priority is you've got to get young people in the population that they're targeting. They want to get people into well-paying jobs. And then after that, or sometimes while they're getting started, they can pursue more schooling at the same time. And in a way, that's kind of what you did, too. So I guess, I'm wondering where you land. There is this big debate about work first versus trying to get people into more degree based programs. I wonder whether you have any reflections on that.

Ebony Beckwith [00:08:19] I think it's as individual as the individual. And like I said before, it really just depends. Not everyone has the means, the resources, the support, the knowledge, the awareness to go straight from high school to a four-year college. I definitely do believe that there are ... I call myself a lifelong learner. So there are things that I need to continue to learn. Right? And so I feel like as long as we're continuing to learn and educate ourselves, however that may be, that's what's most important, not necessarily the where you went, who you know, and this and that. But it's really about just that commitment to educating yourself and being that lifelong learner.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:09:08] Yeah, that's just really great to hear, Ebony. Before we dive more into your work at Salesforce, I would love to just get your thoughts on the role of employers more broadly. You mentioned this a little bit earlier, but in order for us to see more young people successfully transition from high school into the workforce, I would imagine that the workforce would have to shift a bit in terms of their role, in terms of creating those bridges from education to the workforce ecosystem. What do you think about that?

Ebony Beckwith [00:09:39] Yeah, I think that we all have a role to play. I always say in my role that philanthropy is not a competitive sport and that we all need to work together to solve really important issues. So I think it takes everyone, especially when it comes to education and workforce development, we all need to find ways to bring in diverse talent, not because it's good for business, because it is, but because it's the right thing to do. Right? And I think that that partnerships are really key here. We partnered with organizations like Braven to help support first-generation college students with access to post-college jobs, because we know that in this day and age, a degree alone is not enough. So even with my own story, like I said, the payoff is not always linear. And we have to meet these young people where they are and support them in really reaching their goals. So that's why we all have to be involved. It can't just be a workforce development program or a college or the government or a business. It's going to take a multi-sector approach and coordination to like to really get involved.

Ben Wildavsky [00:10:47] Well, you know, Ebony, I definitely take your point that there are many different players, including employers, who have to be involved in getting people into really good pathways, into the workforce. I'm wondering if we could focus a little bit on some specific things that Salesforce is doing when it comes to workforce development.

Ebony Beckwith [00:11:08] All right. So let me start by sharing why our programs exist. I think that's really important. Fundamentally, we believe that talent is equally distributed, but opportunity is not. So some young adults, as we know, are limited in reaching their full potential simply because of where they live, the color of their skin, their gender, whatever the case may be. So really, the goal of our strategy is to prepare all young people, particularly those who've been overlooked with the education, the skills, the opportunities, whatever they need to be successful. And I think, really, if this last year has taught us anything, it's that we really need to source talent differently. The idea of how we source talent, who has access to opportunity, who has systemically been left behind are really critical questions. So that's a little bit about why and our strategy. So now let's talk about the what and what we focus on. So Salesforce, we're really committed to workforce education and workforce development through a series of diverse programs really dedicated to training and hiring for the jobs of tomorrow. And we do that through our philanthropic investments. We support programs that are helping to level the playing field for young adults. We also have a variety of programs and partners that are helping us train young people and really helping, giving them the educational background to help build diverse talent in our Salesforce ecosystems. That's like Pathfinder and Climb Higher. And Trailhead is another really great example. It's our free online learning platform that helps anyone skill up for in-demand jobs in the Salesforce ecosystems. And then we, finally, we have nearly a thousand interns and apprentices across the globe at Salesforce through our untapped talent program. So this experience helps them gain valuable skills while contributing to our teams. And it's really been amazing to watch all of these programs scale around the world. And I just think, imagine if every company made a commitment to untapped talent, workforce development, and really committing to the future success of young people.

Ben Wildavsky [00:13:14] Yeah, sure. Well, let me zero in on Trailhead. Could you just explain what that is for a total beginner like me?

Ebony Beckwith [00:13:22] So fundamentally, Trailhead prepares people for Salesforce certifications which are globally recognized credentials that demonstrate skills, experience, hands-on expertise. And we offer 39 certifications for five roles. And those roles are Salesforce admin, developer, architects, marketers, and consultants. And these certs and

micro credentials are really helping us reimagine the educational experience so that success doesn't just depend on a degree. So I think, I mean, I have become a Trailhead ranger in the past year during the pandemic because I have had the time to really focus on it and do it. And it was so helpful for me. I work at Salesforce, but just a little bit, spending the time and going a little bit deeper has really enhanced not only my view into the company, but also outside of the company, like we said, in the Salesforce ecosystem. And anyone can do it.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:14:19] Yeah, it's just great to hear about how you're continuing to be an ongoing learner, like you talked about earlier, including with Trailhead in your back pocket. Honestly, I need to get on there and I'm sure I could learn a lot as well.

Ebony Beckwith [00:14:34] Absolutely. I mean, let me I can give you a really great example. There's this woman. Her name is Stephanie Brown, and she lost her job as a full-time chef when the country closed down due to covid. And her interest in technology inspired her to start learning on Trailhead. Right. And in just three months, she earned her first Salesforce administrator certification. And today she's a full-time Salesforce admin at a tech company and now she's working on her fourth certification. So it's possible. It's doable. It's easy. It's fun. And that's really the beauty of it. And I think that's what's so different about learning and development today. There's that gamified version. It's fun. There's a community — that's the other thing about trailhead that I really love. And some of the other programs that we're working on is that you have a community of trailblazers who can mentor you. They know about opportunities for employment. And there's really that support network really built around you, that didn't exist when I was going into the workforce.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:15:38] Yeah. And honestly, those Salesforce administrator roles, they play well, too. They can be absolutely path-breaking for people looking to help strengthen their economic prospects as well.

Ebony Beckwith [00:15:49] Absolutely.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:15:51] So one of the things that comes up again and again in the interviews that we've done on this show is the idea of skills-based hiring, and you even mentioned it earlier, that it'd be great if companies really looked more for skills than necessarily a degree. How do you feel, like, Salesforce has clearly, you're helping to move that forward in various ways through your great programs. But as a company, as an organization, as a hiring manager, how have you seen things evolve in your workforce on this front?

Ebony Beckwith [00:16:21] I think that I mean, just Trailhead alone is a demonstration of our commitment to skills-based hiring and understanding and knowing that when you're able to put that credential on your LinkedIn page and when you have that certification, it means something not only to you, to us, but to the world. It signals that you have done the work. And so I think that that's becoming a more recognized, you know, certification, badge, call it whatever. And I think that that's the wave of the future, is that employers are more readily accepting of badges, skills, credentials, versus the degree, this hard and fast degree which doesn't always say much. Right?

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:17:07] Sure. So Ebony, you work for Marc Benioff, directly for him. How do you feel like or do you feel like your own background at all helped to influence how Salesforce or other team members thought about the work of the company?

Ebony Beckwith [00:17:24] That's a really interesting question. First of all, it's a real privilege to be able to work for a founder and CEO. So that's number one. I definitely think that my background and experience plays a role. I've been with Salesforce for 12 years now, so it's been over a decade at this company. And being able to watch our company grow and scale, go through different growth stages and then be able to contribute to it is really meaningful. I love the company that we were. I love the company that we're becoming. And one of the things that Marc shared with me when I started reporting to him is to trust my gut. You know. Trust your gut. I was like, OK, what advice and feedback do you have? I'm ready to get started. And I want to be the eager-beaver I am. And he said, You're here for a reason. Trust your gut. And I was like, oh, OK. It took me a while to process that. I thought I was going to get a plan. And that's what I've been able to do. I've been able, you know, I do have lots of plans and strategies that we put in place. But really, it's really great advice and it's advice that I give to others. Salesforce wants me to show up as my authentic self so they get the gal who went to junior college before she went to complete her four-year degree. They get all of me when I come to the company every day.

Ben Wildavsky [00:18:55] I want to ask about Salesforce, you know, sort of as an institution, you know, in some ways it's kind of an aspirational story for a lot of people in the business world. And that's not just in terms of your bottom line, though obviously, that gets a lot of attention, but it's also your philanthropy, all of the workforce development stuff you do and we've talked about. I wonder what you would say to other employers who might turn to you for advice. People who are really trying in good faith to build a workforce pipeline that is really centered around opportunity.

Ebony Beckwith [00:19:28] I think it's a matter of being extremely intentional. These things don't happen by accident. And so when it comes to workforce development, when it comes to education, making sure you know where you want to go, you understand how you want to get there, what approach you want to take to getting there, what's going to stand in your way, how do you measure it is really important because what you measure gets done. And so it's the same thing for workforce development, education opportunities. You have to be intentional. Writing it down is key. Socializing it with your employees so they can hold you accountable and you hold yourself accountable, I think is really critical.

Ben Wildavsky [00:20:09] Sure. I mean, let me flip it just briefly. And obviously, I'm not asking you to name names, but I'm wondering if there are things that you feel that people should be moving away from, you know, old practices or just kind of, you know, inertia that just hasn't been working for employers.

Ebony Beckwith [00:20:27] I think that things we need to stray away from are thinking that things have to be the way they've always been. We need to be a lot more open-minded when it comes to who we source, where we sourced from, their old myths around their pipeline problems. I think we just need to be open to exploring things differently and really letting talent come to you and not turning away talent, even just by language on the job application. I was talking to someone many years ago and there was a question on a job application she was stumped on, and it was "permanent address." It seems like a very simple question. She's like, "I don't have a permanent address. I've moved a bunch of times." And so there are just systems and processes and ways people think about things that we as employers need to be aware of now that could be unintentionally hurting us because we've phrased something in a way that's not inclusive. So I think it's just being open and aware that things have changed and we should welcome and embrace that.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:21:42] Ebony, you really have in many ways a front-row seat to a new generation of young talent. And I have two questions. One, what would you tell your 20-year-old self? And two, are you optimistic about what the future holds for young people in this country?

Ebony Beckwith [00:22:01] I think, yes, I have to be optimistic. I'm definitely an optimist by nature, but I am an optimist in my role as well. I do believe that every generation places their bets on their young people and I just see some of the things that young people are doing today and it blows my mind. So I'm very hopeful for these young people coming up. And there's just so much. I'm excited for them. I'm excited for them. And I always tell my interns, like, "I can't be, I can't wait to work for one of you one day." They'll be the future CEOs. They'll be making all the decisions. So I try I remember to be nice to them.

Ben Wildavsky [00:22:47] Always a good lesson.

Ebony Beckwith [00:22:48] You leave the door open, don't burn any bridges. And I would say the advice I would give my 20 year old self or my younger self, what would be the advice that you know, some of the stuff that we talked about. My path doesn't all have to be figured out. If you make one false move or you get a false start or if you feel like you're not doing something, there's always time to correct. And so just because things didn't start right doesn't mean they won't end well. And I just believe in trusting yourself and trusting your gut, but also having a network and resources around you who can help you and guide you on that path. So that's where that mentorship and that social capital comes in. Having people around you who tell you the truth, I think is so important.

(music)

Ben Wildavsky [00:23:46] That was our conversation with Ebony Beckwith. What a podcast season this has been. You know, it has really been personally educational for me, hearing from people like David Deming, who reminds us, you know, how the B.A. remains the gold standard for so much of what people are trying to accomplish with education and careers. But it was also really instructive to hear from guests like Gerald Chertavian, you know, from Year Up, talking about the really vital need, that a different set of learners have for just different kinds of pathways to meaningful education and careers.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:24:22] Yeah, Ben, I'll never forget our very first interview with Jeff Selingo and how we really got to hear the inside of American higher education in terms of admissions and how it is not the meritocracy that we would all hope for it to be and hopefully it will become. But then, you know, a couple episodes later, we got to talk to Reynold Verret from tiny Xavier University, the historically black college in New Orleans, Louisiana, that produces the most Black doctors in the country. You realize that there are really great leaders out there, really doing something about ensuring that overlooked talent really gets where it should go.

Ben Wildavsky [00:25:01] Yeah, he was, I mean, you know, all of my guests are my favorites, but he was definitely one of my favorites. And, you know, speaking of favorites, I just want to thank you very much Aimée for joining me as co-host for this season. It's just been a great pleasure to have you. So I just really want to thank you.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:25:21] Well, thank you so much again for having me as your guest co-host for this season. It's been just fantastic and so much fun for me. I also learned a ton.

Ben Wildavsky [00:25:29] And finally, thanks to our listeners for joining us for this season.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:25:33] Absolutely. Stay well and safe, everyone.

[00:25:41] “Lessons Earned” is produced by Strada Education Network in partnership with Antica Productions. You can subscribe to “Lessons Earned” wherever you get your podcasts. And if you liked this episode, please give us a five-star rating.

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