

TECH TALENT 2024 SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Ismail Ali

Director of Talent Initiatives, Minnesota Technology Association

As the Director of Talent Initiatives at the Minnesota Technology Association, Ismail leads a range of initiatives and programs aimed at strengthening Minnesota's Tech Talent ecosystem. He oversees the Minnesota Aspirations in Computing Program (MnAiC), Jumpstart, and Tech Careers 1.0. Ismail also guides the ACE Leadership Program, facilitates employer engagement partnerships, and orchestrates MnTech's annual Tech Talent conference. Before joining MnTech, Ismail held roles as a Community Manager at Kindly, contributed to Twin Cities PBS' content team, and held a variety of community engagement-centered roles that supported our state's East African community. Ismail earned his Bachelor of Arts in Communication from St. John's University and a Master of Science in Media Ventures from Boston University's College of Communication. Beyond his professional endeavors, Ismail finds joy in playing basketball, going for runs, spending time with friends and loved ones, and exploring new restaurants.

Emily Balfour

Vice President of Technology Solutions, York Solutions

Emily Balfour is a dynamic leader focused on harnessing the power of technology to drive business outcomes. As the Vice President of Technology Solutions at York Solutions, Emily leads a team of talented technologists, ensuring the delivery of innovative, tailored solutions that meet clients' unique needs. Her leadership emphasizes strategic planning, collaboration, and fostering an environment where discovery and growth are key. Emily is committed to building cohesive, high performing teams who thrive on working together to solve problems. Her ability to cultivate the right talent for every project has been instrumental in reducing risks and accelerating time to independence for her clients. She is also actively involved in York's Think IT Association, where she champions cross-industry connections and professional development through networking and collaboration. When she's not working, Emily enjoys exploring new destinations, spending quality time with her family, and playing pickleball.

Tawanna Black

Founder and CEO, Center for Economic Inclusion

Tawanna A. Black is an award-winning architect of racially inclusive and equitable talent, supply chain, philanthropy and marketing strategies that yield transformational results for businesses, their consumers, and the communities they work in. For more than 20 years, she has earned the trust of executives by mobilizing teams to create and execute strategies that benefit diverse workers, consumers, and business owners and drive growth and fiscal health.

Hannah Brenwall

Campus Recruiting Manager, Turnberry/Crew

Hannah leads Crew's award-winning campus recruiting program. This program has been bringing the top 2% of college applicants from across the country into the Crew program for 15 years. Prior to her time in talent acquisition, Hannah spent time in consultant management, training, and as a business analysis associate in the Crew program. She knew from the start that she wanted to be involved in growing and developing Crew and loves that her career has lead her here.

Steve Buchanan

Principal Program Manager, Microsoft

Steve Buchanan is a Principal Program Manager with Microsoft focused on improving the cloud. He is an O'Reilly Author, Pluralsight author, the author of eight technical books, Onalytica's Who's Who in Cloud?-top 50, and a former 10-time Microsoft MVP. He has presented at tech events, including, DevOps Days, Open Source North, Midwest Management Summit (MMS), Microsoft Ignite, BITCon, Experts Live Europe, OSCON, Inside Azure management, keynote at Minnebar 18, and user groups. He has been a guest on over a dozen podcasts and has been featured in several publications including the Star Tribune (the 5th largest newspaper in the US). He stays active in the technical community and enjoys blogging about his adventures in the world of tech at www.buchatech.com

Kelly Calendine

Client Director, Dev10

Kelly's 15+ year career has been dedicated to a variety of IT roles. She is currently a Client Director at Dev10 where she enables individuals from diverse backgrounds to launch careers in tech. Prior to Dev10, she spent years as an IT program/change management consultant at various corporations (Target, UHG, Best Buy) and digital agencies. The common thread through all her career experiences has been working with people to drive positive change.

Kelly Danger

Software Engineer

Kelly earned a Bachelor's degree in Theatre from Eastern Washington University in 2004. She spent her early professional life working in dozens of non-technical industries in any role in which she could leverage her 4 years of training in Jazz Hands, which was primarily service, sales, and support. She spent 6 years working at home as a wife and mom, and on re-entering the non-domestic workforce in 2017, found herself selling memberships at The Y, and supporting office operations at a Minneapolis nonprofit. In August of 2020, Kelly started the Full Stack Engineering program at Prime Digital Academy, and is now a back-end software engineer at Stitch Fix.

Paul DeBettignies

Founder, Minnesota Talent Leaders

Paul DeBettignies is better known online as "Minnesota Headhunter". Recognized as a Talent Leader, depending on the project he is working on, titles like Senior Tech Recruiter, Senior People Operations Consultant, Principal Talent Advisor are frequently used.

For 25+ years Paul has built software, tech, product and digital teams with startups and tech companies throughout the country with a focus on Minnesota and the Midwest and creates recruiting strategies for Fortune 500 clients including When I work, Total Expert, Granicus, SPS Commerce, and Securian Financial.

Author of "Minnesota Headhunter" (the longest running regional recruiter blog) and the recently debuted weekly newsletter "#RecruiterLife", Founder of Minnesota Talent Leaders, and a national industry speaker with attendees from A(mazon) to Z(oom), Paul is a hub in the regional and national recruiting and talent acquisition communities.

Jade Denson

Director, Tech (Talent + Engagement), Target

Jade is a passionate leader driving the evolution of tech talent and team member experience at Target for the past three years. As Director of the Tech Talent and Engagement team, she is committed to fostering a high-performing and inclusive tech culture. She leads a team focused on elevating learning and development, tech talent programs, events, external partnerships, and more. A skilled connector of people, ideas, and solutions, she brings energy and innovation to every aspect of her role. Previously, she drove talent and engagement with the Minnesota Technology Association and Genesys Works. When not leading her team, Jade enjoys collecting art and spending time with her friends and family in the Twin Cities.

Bianca DuBose

Lead Tech Operations Program Manager, Target

With over 20 years in learning and development, Bianca is a distinguished partner in optimizing organizational effectiveness and enhancing team engagement through targeted educational initiatives. Specializing in strategic planning, project management, and DEI programs, Bianca has a proven track record in leading complex projects and fostering cross-functional collaboration. As Lead Program Manager in Tech at Target Corporation, Bianca drives advanced learning strategies and tech program management, focusing on impactful workforce development. Previously, Bianca led training initiatives in manufacturing, healthcare, and social services. Holding advanced degrees in Marketing, Organizational Development, and a Certificate in Instructional Design, Bianca employs a diverse toolkit of change management methodologies and is dedicated to advancing professional development and inclusive learning environments.

Dave Elliston

Talent Leader & Recruiter

Dave is a self-professed geek and raving fan of the Twin Cities tech community. With nearly two decades of experience spanning both agency and in-house recruitment, he has developed a deep understanding of the ever-evolving employment landscape. He has been featured on industry podcasts, served on speaker panels and presented both locally and nationally on a wide range of topics related to both sides of the job search table including job search best practices, resume writing, non-traditional candidate sources, diversity recruiting, campus engagement and professional networking. His true passion lies in community building and supporting job seekers who are far too often overlooked.

Kevin Erickson

Regional Vice President, Horizontal Talent

Kevin Erickson serves as Regional Vice President at Horizontal Talent, overseeing recruiting, delivery, and account management operations in Minneapolis, Chicago, Denver, and Dallas. With over 20 years of experience in the staffing industry, Kevin is a recognized thought leader in the IT staffing space.

Since joining Horizontal in 2019, Kevin has been instrumental in driving significant growth by acquiring new clients, expanding existing relationships, and mentoring team members. Under his leadership, the company has hired key leaders and solidified its position as the largest staffing firm headquartered in Minnesota and the largest ethnic minority-owned business in the Twin Cities.

Prior to Horizontal Talent, Kevin held leadership roles at a Fortune 500 staffing company for 14 years, including Regional Vice President and Executive Director. Outside of work, Kevin enjoys spending time with his wife and three active children. He has a love of the outdoors and when he's not working or shuttling his kids around town, you can catch him at his family cabin fishing or boating!

Samantha Fritsche

Senior Tech Operations Program Manager, Target

Samantha started her career with in 2020 as a Software Engineer as part of Target's Technology Leadership Program before transitioning to her current role as a Tech Operations Program Manager on the Tech Talent and Engagement Team. She specializes in crafting training and strategic tech initiatives, with a current focus on both emerging technologies and tech fundamentals. With her technical background and holding a degree with concentrations in Computer Science and Applied Math & Statistics, Samantha brings a unique perspective to her work, helping to bridge conversations between people with different background. She finds joy in helping others unlock their potential and drive positive change in the tech industry.

Joseph Fuller

Professor of Management Practice, Harvard Business School

Joe Fuller is a Professor of Management Practice at Harvard Business School and co-leads the Managing the Future of Work project, where his team pursues research that business and policy leaders can put into action to navigate this complex landscape. The project's current research areas focus on six forces that are redefining the nature of work including technology trends like artificial intelligence and automation, contingent workforces, skills-based hiring, and more. A 1981 graduate of HBS, Joe was a founder and first employee of the global consulting firm, Monitor Group, now Monitor-Deloitte. He served as the Chief Executive Officer of its commercial consulting operations until 2006 and remained a Senior Advisor to the firm until its acquisition by Deloitte in 2012. During his three decades in consulting, Joe worked with senior executives and policymakers on a wide variety of issues related to corporate strategy and national competitiveness. He has particularly deep experience in industries with a heavy reliance on technology, such as life sciences, ICT and the defense and aerospace industries. He is currently researching the evolution of the role of CEOs and the C-suite in public companies.

Rachel Grosskurth

Youth Program Director, Hired

With over 20 years of experience working with young people, Rachel has recently taken lead of Hired's Youth Programs. Since 2007 Rachel has worked in numerous project areas within Hired's youth team, receiving promotions from employment counselor to manager, then to director in January 2021. She has extensive experience in youth probation, corrections, and treatment, and deep knowledge of the juvenile justice system, expungement, and youth employment. She is passionate about fighting racial and social injustices in our community, and serves as a Racial Justice Facilitator at YWCA Minneapolis.

Rachel holds an Offender Workforce Development Specialist (OWDS) Certification and is a licensed Global Career Development Facilitator (GCDF). She graduated from Metropolitan State University with a B.S. in Criminal Justice; her M.A. from Alfred Adler Graduate School is in School Counseling and Guidance.

Amanda Hardy

Employer Engagement Manager, Summit Academy OIC

Amanda Hardy is the Employer Engagement Manager at Summit Academy OIC. Her role involves advocating for, and advancing, non-traditional and diverse talent pipelines across various sectors. She is passionate about building and nurturing relationships with employers, and championing innovative approaches to workforce development. Amanda was also recently appointed to the Governor's Workforce Development Board in Minnesota. You can often find Amanda checking out local breweries on the weekends with her husband!

Silvia Hinton

President, Hinton Consulting

Silvia Hinton is an experienced senior IT executive who has spent her career in the Twin Cities area. During her career, she has had responsibility for technical teams spanning multiple disciplines in the Financial Services, Defense, and Healthcare industries.

Most recently Silvia worked at York Solutions as the VP of Solutions Group. Over the nearly 8 years she was there she designed, implemented, and ran the Emerging Talent (formally Barriers to Entry) program. This program was developed to offer individuals from nontraditional backgrounds a pathway into technology. During Silvia's tenure, the program offerings grew to include technical training and project delivery.

Today, Silvia is working as a consultant. In addition to other client engagements, Silvia is working with Jeff Tollefson and the Minnesota Technology Association on the Drive for 5 grant work

Alexandra Holter

Computer Science Coordinator, Bloomington Public Schools

Alexandra holds a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from Oklahoma State University and has extensive experience developing K-12 computer science programs with a focus on identity-inclusive classrooms and equitable access. Her partnerships with community and industry leaders provide valuable opportunities for students and teachers alike.

As Chair of the Computer Science Teachers Association (CSTA) Policy Committee, Alexandra contributed to drafting Minnesota's State CS Education Strategic Plan. A leading voice in STEM education, she presents on topics like responsible AI integration and computer science as a lever for social justice.

Catherine Jett

Research Strategist, RealTime Talent

Catherine is a creative and intellectually curious mixed-methods researcher with over a decade of experience. At RealTime Talent, Catherine focuses on providing timely custom insights to our education and industry partners—and she is passionate about furthering equitable economic opportunity for all Minnesotans. Prior to joining RTT, Catherine leveraged her skills as a research consultant and external evaluator in the education, health, and cultural sectors. She loves using quantitative and qualitative methods in tandem to gain the best understanding of any question and delights in telling relevant and meaningful stories through data. Before training as an epidemiologist at University of Illinois at Chicago, where she got her MPH, Catherine earned a BA in Spanish and Gender Studies at Tufts University. When she isn't crunching numbers or making pretty graphs, you might find Catherine biking around the Twin Cities, learning a new language, having a snack—or even all three at once.

Heidi Johnson

Chief of Staff, ECMC Group

Heidi Johnson is the chief of staff for ECMC Group, where she has spent much of her career leading a multitude of efforts to help students succeed. Most recently, she has been focused on developing a strategy for ECMC Group to expand its support of underserved learners, particularly age 16-24 BIPOC youth. Her efforts have resulted in the development of three youth-centered concepts – developed by young adults of color for young adults of color – to create solutions to catalyze their valuable engagement in education and workforce ecosystems.

Serving on the Generation Next Leadership and ConnexMSP leadership councils, EdNorth, Saint Paul Urban Tennis, Reve Consulting Customer Advisory Board, and the Executive Committee of the Minneapolis

Regional Chamber of Commerce, Heidi sees firsthand where the intersection between youth and workforce can be optimized. Heidi is also Project Management Professional certified, has obtained her Six Sigma Black Belt, and several other IT-related certifications.

Christy Larsen

Director of Employer Partnerships, Prime Digital Academy

Christy Larsen (she/her) is the Director of Employer Partnerships at Prime Digital Academy. For the last eight years, Christy has specialized in helping students and alumni achieve their professional goals through individualized coaching, practice, and guidance. She is constantly seeking to understand and engage with the tech community in order to amplify the voices of non-traditional tech talent. Christy is a fan of all things sports related, enjoys splitting wood and fishing, and has a (massive) plant obsession.

Greg Larson

Sr. Director, Digital Engineering, Target

Greg Larson is a Sr. Director of Technology at Target leading an organization of engineering teams that create Target.com and the Target mobile app. Getting kids into STEM has been a years-long passion of his. He is the current Board Chair with High Tech Kids, a non-profit that runs 3 of the FIRST Robotics programs across MN. He has also been a steering committee member of CSforAll-MN that past few years, advocating for equitable access to CS Education.

Bryan Lindsley

Director of Strategic Initiatives, RealTime Talent

Bryan Lindsley is the Director of Strategic Initiatives for RealTime Talent, a nonprofit that closes workforce gaps and improves talent pipelines with a wide range of data analytics and innovative strategies. Previously Bryan led efforts related to systems change for the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, a national network of collaboratives in 30 communities around the country. He has been executive director of the Minneapolis Saint Paul Workforce Innovation Network (MSPWin), a funders collaborative. Bryan has also been the executive director of Minnesota's state workforce development board, a policy analyst, employment counselor, and research consultant. He studied race, apartheid, and nation-building in southern Africa, and the economics of fair trade coffee in Guatemala. Bryan has a bachelor's degree in social justice from St. Olaf College and a master's degree in public policy with a concentration in community and economic development from the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota. He is an alumnus of the James P. Shannon Leadership Institute. Bryan lives in St. Paul, MN and writes The Effective Problemsolver, a biweekly newsletter about addressing social problems.

Ieesha Mckinzie Collins

Managing Director, Greater MSP Partnership

Ieesha McKinzie Collins is the Managing Director of ConnexMSP, GREATER MSP's newest strategic initiative focused on ensuring young BIPOC professionals are recruited, hired, and supported by local employers as they enter the workforce.

Prior to joining GREATER MSP, Ieesha served as Managing Director of External Relations for Breakthrough Collaborative, a national education nonprofit based in Oakland, CA. Other career highlights include leading strategic communications for a large charter school network in Texas and working in brand marketing & communications at General Mills. Ieesha also served as the education grants portfolio manager for the General Mills Foundation and has volunteered on several nonprofit boards which align with her deep commitment to educational equity.

Ieesha is a proud first-generation college graduate who earned a bachelor's in journalism from Hampton

University, a master's in integrated marketing communications from Northwestern University, and a master's in educational leadership from the Broad Center. As someone who values lifelong learning, leesha has participated in several leadership development programs including Teach For America, Management Leadership for Tomorrow, and The Broad Residency in Urban Education. Outside of the office, leesha enjoys spending time with family and friends, playing scrabble, and hosting themed social gatherings for fun.

Cheryl Moeller

Executive Director, High Tech Kids

Cheryl is the Executive Director of High Tech Kids, a Minnesota non-profit that offers K-12 STEM Robotics programs (FIRST LEGO League Challenge, FIRST LEGO League Explore and FIRST Tech Challenge). Prior to High Tech Kids, Cheryl worked as an educator at The Bakken Museum and University of St. Thomas STEPS camp. She has a degree in Electrical Engineering from the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana and worked as a product engineer at Medtronic, VTC Incorporated and Honeywell prior to her work in STEM non-profit work. She is the proud mom of 3 adult children, all who work as computer scientists.

Abdi Mohamed

Founder/Lead IT Instructor, IT Metrohub

Abdi Mohamed is a dedicated STEM educator and technology leader with a passion for empowering underrepresented communities. As a Network Security Engineer, Abdi has worked with industry leaders including 3M, Prime Therapeutics, Summit Orthopedics, Lumen (formerly CenturyLink), Emerson Electric, and many others. His extensive experience in the tech field fuels his commitment to creating pathways for underserved youth in metropolitan areas.

In 2015, Abdi founded IT Metrohub, the State of Minnesota Office of Higher Education licensed training provider, aimed at delivering tech education and career opportunities for youth and young adults. Through programs in Cybersecurity, IT Support, and Cloud Engineering, IT Metrohub equips students with essential skills and meaningful experiences, including internships and workshops. Many of Abdi's students have successfully secured positions at esteemed organizations such as Wells Fargo, the State of Minnesota, Sovoz, and various other companies. Abdi believes that by investing in the next generation of tech talent, we can drive innovation and foster a more inclusive future in the tech industry.

Erin Olson

Senior Director of Strategic Research, RealTime Talent

Erin is a well-respected community leader in Minnesota's education-workforce ecosystem with a diverse skillset in action research, human-centered design, facilitation, and analysis to drive data into action. Erin is passionate about sparking innovation between workforce, higher education, business, and economic development systems to maximize high-opportunity career pathways. Erin has extensive experience in education, workforce, housing, and health data analysis, early childhood education, nonprofit development, and refugee resettlement. As Senior Director of Strategic Research for RealTime Talent, Erin leverages qualitative and quantitative workforce and education data to evaluate program alignment to local labor market workforce needs and assess educational program outcomes. Erin holds an undergraduate degree in Anthropology from Wheaton College and two Master's Degrees in Urban and Regional Planning and Public Health from the University of Minnesota, where she focused on community economic development, housing, and population studies.

James Pierce

CIO, Minnesota Diversified Industries

James currently serves as the Chief Information Officer at Minnesota Diversified Industries (MDI), a plastic manufacturing company dedicated to creating job opportunities for individuals with disabilities. MDI is committed to inclusive employment, ensuring that people with disabilities have access to meaningful work. As CIO, James oversees all facets of the organization's IT operations, leading a team of professionals and collaborating with business leaders to equip MDI with the necessary technology to support its mission and operations.

Beyond his role at MDI, James is an active City Council Member in Edina, MN, and contributes to both nonprofit and for-profit boards across the state. He resides in Edina with his wife, Stephanie, and their three daughters, Olivia, Jamie, and Kaitlyn. A proud graduate of Tuskegee University with a degree in Computer Science, he also holds an MBA from the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management. James is inspired by Nelson Henderson's quote: "The true meaning of life is to plant trees under whose shade you do not expect to sit." This quote aligns with his passion for giving back to the community and leaving a positive impact for future generations.

Kristi Sarles

Recruiting Director, Turnberry/Crew

Kristi Sarles is a seasoned Director at Crew, bringing over 10 years in talent acquisition strategy and management with a specialty in early career hiring and merger and acquisition planning and execution. Her career is marked by a remarkable nine-year specialization in the hiring and training of early career talent across the country and managing the merger and acquisition landscape. In her current role, Kristi plays a pivotal role in shaping Crew's talent strategy by overseeing the recruitment and hiring of their national junior talent development consultant program, which spans over 300 consultants nation-wide. She is passionately committed to fostering career growth, promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion within the workplace, and identifying and attracting future leaders to the organization. She brings together people, process, and technology to drive exceptional candidate experience, expanding and reaching diverse talent pools, and building strong relationships throughout the recruitment lifecycle.

Dave Swenson

VP, Senior Group Application Manager

Dave Swenson has been with U.S. Bank for 29 years, mostly managing application development groups. Currently, he has particular focus on early careers programs. He worked at IBM for 11 years prior in technical sales and consulting roles.

Maria Vittone

Director, University & Workforce Partnerships

Though Director of University & Workforce Partnerships is Maria's official title, she wouldn't feel complete without adding a few more descriptors: Student Retention Champion, Workforce Connector, Mentorship Matters Spokesperson, and 'Bloom Where You are Planted' Coach. Maria finds her passion in places where change and reinvention is happening. Having experienced the need to re-direct her career numerous times, she can empathize and walk beside those who are brave enough to do the same.

Maria's gender equity & mentorship program, Be Bold- Break the Mold: Women Succeed in Nontraditional Careers was a notable program singled out at North Hennepin Community College (NHCC) for the National HEED Award 2021 (Higher Education Excellence in Diversity) and NHCC Diversity Program of the year in 2024. She was recently nominated for the Seed Coalition Leadership & Civic Engagement Award in 2024.

In her work with Hennepin Technical College & North Hennepin Community College, Maria was presented with a MnACTE (MN Association for Career and Technical Education) Partnership Award for her mentoring and empowerment initiatives. In conjunction with Women's History Month, she was co-awarded Campus Program of the Year in 2023. She was also the recipient of the National Academic Association for Academic Advising for an adult-learner orientation program.

Life and work are blended for Maria, but when not dreaming up her next career/workforce program, you'll find her: practicing yoga (a 20+-year commitment), traveling with her family, reading multiple books at once, gardening, taking pictures of her cats, and enjoying the great outdoors! Maria and her husband have two young adult daughters who are both in college pursuing their dreams- one is working to become a Park Ranger (a nontraditional career!) and the other is exploring her passion to support refugees & better the process for asylum seekers.

Andrea Wilson Vazquez

Computer Science Specialist, Minnesota Department of Education

Andrea Wilson Vazquez is the Computer Science Specialist for the Minnesota Department of Education where she leads collaborative statewide initiatives that expand equitable and sustainable access to and participation in computer science education, K-12. She supports Minnesota schools and educators to provide high-quality CS education to prepare students for personal and professional success by developing computer science knowledge, skills, confidence, and a sense of belonging. Before joining MDE, Andrea was the Deputy Director of the ECEP Alliance and the Director of Educator Training and School Partnerships for a Minnesota-based nonprofit called Code Savvy. She has a passion for facilitating equity-focused computer science professional development and is experienced in strategic planning and resource development for K-12 computer science education programs. She also has over 10 years of experience in education and previously worked as a K-12 teacher and an instructional coach, with a specific focus on computer science ed, makerspace, and supporting K-12 English learners.

Beau Zamora

Security Engineer, Ostra Cybersecurity

Beau Zamora is a dedicated Security Engineer with a strong foundation in cybersecurity, initially developed through self-study. After enhancing their skills at Summit Academy OIC, they secured an internship at Ostra, where they quickly advanced to the engineering team. With expertise in networking, firewalls, VPNs, and secure internet access, Beau Zamora is committed to safeguarding digital environments and continuously expanding their knowledge in the ever-evolving field of cybersecurity.