

Report aims at untapped workforce for Israel's growing high-tech sector

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Women, Arabs and ultra-Orthodox are under-represented in Israel's tech sector, according to a recent report

The growth of Israel's powerful high-tech sector is not being matched by adequate increases in employee numbers, a report said Sunday, with recruitment of more women, and Arabs and ultra-Orthodox Jewish men needed.

Israel's high-tech sector—an industry that has earned it the nickname "start-up nation"—is seen as a global leader.

Its 7,000 local high-tech firms and dozens of research and development centres of foreign companies employ 280,000 Israelis and make up 12 percent of the business sector GDP and a whopping 43 percent of exports, according to the economy ministry.

But while the absolute number of Israelis working in high-tech has grown over the past five years, their proportion of the labour force remains around the eight percent mark, putting the Jewish state at potential disadvantage in the competitive global market.

The report by the Israel Innovation Authority and Start-Up Nation Central, an NGO based in Tel Aviv, showed there were 15,300 vacant positions in the local industry, a shortage that could be preventing the high-tech sector from growing even faster.

"The tech sector is the main potential driver of the growth of the Israeli economy," Eugene Kandel, head of Start-Up Nation Central and former head of Israel's national economic council said.

"The required growth will not be possible if the country's supply of tech workers is inadequate."

Israel has in recent years found ways to compensate for its lack of local employees, setting up intensive "boot camps" to provide technological training, outsourcing work to cheaper countries, supplying visas to skilled foreign workers, and increasing investment in higher technological education.

The overwhelming majority of Israelis employed in the sector are Jewish men, excluding the ultra-Orthodox who tend to be educated mainly in religious studies, and not in English, maths or other subjects necessary for a tech career.

Like Israeli Arabs, few ultra-Orthodox men or women serve in Israel's army, a hothouse for forging high-tech skills, putting them at a significant disadvantage.

As a result, Arabs make up 1.4 percent of the high-tech workforce and ultra-Orthodox men and women just 0.7 percent.

'Unrealised potential'

Women in general are under-represented, the report said, without detailing the reasons.

It said that while they account for 30 percent of high-tech workers, women hold just 23 percent of "core

tech" jobs such as software engineers and only 16 percent of managerial positions.

"The potential of women in tech is probably double these numbers, as girls comprise almost half of all students studying advanced math in high school," it said.

Israel needs to "tap into the unrealised potential in women, the Arab population and the ultra-Orthodox community", said Aharon Aharon, head of the Israel Innovation Authority (IIA), noting that the state had indeed launched a number of programmes aimed at just that.

The need to increase the numbers of employees was "truly a national issue," said Naomi Krieger Carmy, head of the IIA's societal challenges division.

"There's no one silver bullet," she said, rather there are joined solutions.

The report, based on a survey of 40 percent of the industry, did not constitute a "complaint", Kandel said, but an indication of where things stood and how to find solutions.

"If we had more people that would fill these jobs, the country would grow faster and the industry would go much faster," he said.

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