

JobKit Data

Plenary Session

Office of American Innovation

The White House

Remarks by Peter L. Levin

May 1, 2019

First and foremost, I want to thank you for inviting me to speak here today. It is a tremendous honor and one that I take very much to heart.

I recently watched a terrific documentary called “Particle Fever,” which is the story of the Large Hadron Collider near Geneva, Switzerland. These are the folks who recently discovered the Higgs Boson, a key component of the Standard Model of subatomic particles.

There’s a quote in “Particle Fever” which I think captures the mood and the spirit of our time. It comes from Monica Dunford, who was a post-doc working at the lab. She said, “first things first...it is unbelievable how fantastic data is.” I see it exactly the same way.

I think that access to data is a topic that we can all enthusiastically agree on. It falls under the umbrella of “self-evident truths,” and so I won’t spend my precious few minutes trying to justify the “why” of it.

The “whats” and the “hows” are anyway much more interesting.

Today we stand, you stand, at the vanguard of how our government makes data available for life-changing, even life-saving, purposes.

So I want to say a few words about the utility of data access and the culture of data privacy.

In 1813, Jefferson said, “He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me.” Imagine what he’d say, today, about the scientific progress we’ve made in two-and-a-half centuries. From candles to (data about) neutrinos. Of course, his point is about sharing which is why we’re here today.

Data is the most interesting topic anyone can work on, and data sharing is, in my opinion, the most important thing we can do, as long as we don’t drop any flames on any carpets.

Now there are all kinds of public data that we’ve come to rely on and expect, and that we’re perfectly happy to pay for. I am thinking about things like weather data, or GPS data — which are mostly “impersonal” — as well as abstract, derived, and de-identified sets, like financial data, energy data, and justice data.

We need all these to make, and to evaluate, our policy decisions.

Finally there’s data about us as individuals, like our transactions, our credentials, our health, and our jobs.

Let me talk about health and jobs for just a second.

Of all the kinds of data there are, personal health data is the one that we expect to have impenetrable security and perfect privacy.

This will become even more important as our health data comprises our genome, phenome, and proteome.

We who work in the public interest have a responsibility to keep this data, like thoughts in our heads, as private as their owners want them to be.

Of course, some folks may be more open or impulsive about sharing their ideas for political reasons, just as some patients will be eager to contribute their germline profiles to public databases for medical research.

In those cases, indeed in every case, we now understand how important it is to have trustworthy, reliable, verifiable data. Imagine the mischief one can cause by using manipulated data for training the AI used pathology labs, or to process student loan applications, or to make national security decisions, or decisions about who to hire.

We know that our government is uniquely capable to collect, broker, verify, and distribute factual data. These data inform individual choices, and these choices help our country be more secure, more healthy, more fair, more accountable, and more prosperous.

Which naturally returns me to why we're here.

Another thing I know we agree on is the dignity and self-esteem that each of us enjoys from having a good job. A job we're qualified for. A job we feel challenged by. A job that pays us fairly.

Data about labor markets and wages, data about skills and education, and data about productivity, all collected, aggregated, and reconciled in a way that maximizes impact and minimizes intrusion is what JobKit is all about.

I am delighted to be with you and to help you think about how we can help people create, train for, and get good jobs. It is truly a transcendent moral mission, and I am very proud to be part of it.