

In the Spotlight: Trace our decline to education

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Beyond the effects of the recession multiple factors are at play: the rise of global competition where companies go where the talent is or the labor is cheapest; a drop in consumer demand due to excessive government and citizen debt; the dramatic technological transformations of the workplace; and the off-shoring of jobs.

But the greatest and most problematic is what's called the "skill gap." Fix all of the above and unemployment decreases marginally. Don't fix the skill gap and not only unemployment but the American standard of living gets worse.

The skills and work ethic demanded by technologically driven businesses are lacking among many job applicants. This human talent crisis has been 30 years in the making. Like the nation's run-up in debt we now bear the consequences.

Until the 1970s America led the world in the educational development of its children. But by the mid-1980s we were snowballing downhill. From the No. 1 position in high school and college graduates America has fallen to 13th and fifth, respectively. The high school graduation rate of 69 percent hasn't changed since 1970, with 1.2 million kids dropping out annually.

The result: Young adults are now less educated than their parents. This is indeed the fast track to American decline.

All of this was masked by rapid economic expansion that began in 1983 and imploded in 2008. These decades were accompanied by major workplace transformations. Two-thirds of today's jobs require post-high school education, the only door to high-wage jobs. Yet the population of 4 million unemployed young adults 18 to 24 with no more than a high school diploma steadily grows.

The skill gap has become America's economic Achilles heel. Three million jobs remain unfilled because companies can't find applicants with the right skills, a complaint voiced by 52 percent of U.S. employers.

Yet some nations better prepare their young for future economic success than America. Their high school programs include far more work-related education and on-the-job training than America. In Germany, 80 percent of the 18 to 25 age group are employed in comparison to 48 percent in the U.S.

The fact is that America is failing miserably to prepare the majority of its youth for the world of work in the 21st century. Our system of education is "badly broken," notes the Harvard Graduate School of Education in its "Pathways to Prosperity" report.

Just as the workplace has been radically transformed, so too must our educational system. It's not that no one knows what to do. It's simply a failure, albeit a costly one, of our society to demand that it be done. And it all starts locally.

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