

Forum: Skill deficits imperil America's economic competitiveness

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There will be millions of jobs available. America just doesn't have enough workers with the right knowledge, skills and attitudes to fill them. This brings us to the heart of America's talent force crisis.

The high-wage jobs now and in the future are in science, technology, engineering and mathematics; they're called STEM jobs. Lacking that talent here in America, many of these high-wage jobs already have been outsourced to Europe, Japan, Singapore and other countries with a well-educated and -trained labor pool.

Few Americans are aware of that. Instead, they hear feel-good promises - impossible to keep - from political leaders about preventing American jobs from going to low-wage countries like China or Mexico. Most are destined to become low wage anyway. What we want to keep are industries with growing, high-wage jobs.

This is the crux of America's problem. We are losing skilled workers, not forming them. Many of the 70 million highly skilled Baby Boomers are heading for retirement in the coming decade. With 50 percent of our high school graduates with massive skill deficits, America's talent shortage only worsens.

Yet it's a crisis few people feel, see or understand. After all, America is and has been a prosperous country. But this has made us oblivious to how much the rest of the world has changed and how hungry it is for the prosperity we have enjoyed for the last half-century.

An educational arms race is underway. But the deeper American students go in school the poorer their performance becomes: 75 percent of 4th graders meet proficiency standards in reading and math while only 45 percent of 11th graders do. On every international comparison American students are at the bottom - except in obesity, where they occupy first place.

U.S. students of every socio-economic class are comfortably enveloped in a world of things and entertainment. There is little incentive to be diligently engaged in learning unless it's about music, dancing, violence, drugs, and sex, about which they are the world's most knowledgeable. Our culture provides few incentives for acquiring knowledge. When's the last time you saw or heard a message about success being related to hard work and the pursuit of excellence?

True, our education-to-employment system needs reinventing. But don't expect our educational system to solve the problem. Developing a passion for learning and excellence is a cultural matter. That involves all of society: the family, community, business, religious institutions and government.

We are the ones who create the culture. And right now, it's not looking good.

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