

In the Spotlight: On Labor Day, a question: Will Americans prepare for new knowledge economy?

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In the world of work, the Great Recession is that event. Current surveys indicate that half the labor force has experienced work-related hardships, with more than 15 million jobless. Like falling dominos, 2.3 million home foreclosures followed and 6 million more are projected within three years.

The world's workplace has been transformed. It demands a new kind of worker. But in many minds that mental picture has not yet formed.

So what's happened?

From the Civil War to the 1970s the United States led the world in mass production. This blossomed between 1946 and 1972 - America's golden age - when family income doubled and America's standard of living was the marvel of the world.

But from the '70s to the end of the 20th century the world transformed into a post-industrial service economy: finance, health care, education, business services and high-tech centers. The key features of that shift are office/home-based jobs and increasing consumer demand for customized goods and services from hotel accommodations to cell phone applications. Customization is being driven by mushrooming, innovative technology.

Machines that make machines that run machines created a new kind of manufacturing. And workers with low skills were rapidly replaced by computer chips. Simultaneously, other nations realized that to compete with America they had to be better educated and trained. They went at it with gusto. Meanwhile, Americans took things for granted, believing in the myth of a manifest destiny of progress and world dominance. Why worry? The world caught up.

What kinds of employees are needed in a consumer-customized economy? People with plenty of training beyond high school: apprenticeship, certification and degree programs. Yet this is exactly what America has been lacking. Research from Georgetown University's Global Institute states that up to 73 percent of all American jobs (64 percent in Illinois) by 2018 will require more than a high school degree. But that's not all.

Employees need to know how to learn and be committed to life-long learning and up-skilling. They must possess the ability to work well with others and the motivation to assume responsibility to address consumer demands. An attitude of "that's not my job" is a greased chute to no job.

America's prosperity is hinged to knowledge workers. But what do American employers tell us? "We have plenty of applicants, but not enough with the talent and skills we need." In fact, the Global Institute projects a 3 million knowledge worker shortage by 2018.

The opportunities will be there. Will America be prepared?

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