

Gilligan: On Labor Day, commit to not letting talent go idle

By John F. Gilligan

Posted Sep 3, 2016 at 7:06 PM

There is a price for everything. This adage holds true for every aspect of life.

Take the iPhone. Few seem to be able to live without it even while walking, eating, meeting and talking with others. Yet that beloved technology is the same that has destroyed millions of good-paying jobs. It's one price paid for modern ease and productivity.

This is the age of the dawning of artificial intelligence where technology itself creates new technology. The price: Anything can be produced or manufactured in any part of the world better and cheaper than ever before. That's not all. The technological revolution is creating a new class of people: the non-workers.

They are in the prime of their life, educated and motivated. Yet many are burdened with college debt and graduated without skills for the new economy. The Federal Reserve Bank of New York notes that 44 percent of recent graduates are underemployed, i.e., working in jobs that don't require a college education. The good-paying jobs that they would have obtained 20 or even 10 years ago have been vaporized by technological innovations.

It used to be that job destruction was correlated with job creation. That was disruptive and painful, but more and better paying job opportunities materialized. As the new century began, this trend came to a screeching halt and turned negative. We now endure its cumulative effects.

Trying to recapture jobs that have gone abroad misses the heart of the American worker's crisis. Between 2000 and 2010, 85 percent or 5.6 million manufacturing job losses vanished due to coding and robotic technology.

This is also a global problem. Faced with the apparent reality that fewer good-paying jobs seem to be a fact of life, countries such as Finland and Denmark are implementing Universal Benefit Income programs to relieve social distress. Every adult receives a yearly sum of money.

The distinguished scholar and sociologist Charles Murray is proposing that each American citizen 21 years and older receive an annual grant of \$13,000. His detailed plan, including the termination of much of the present welfare system, makes a persuasive argument.

Perhaps this is the price America must pay for idle talent. But if we do nothing, it definitely will be the price. In that case, Washington will need to resort to bread and circuses used by the Roman Empire to quell the masses. Free marijuana along with Pokémon Go would probably suffice.

Work, whether paid or not, is a means of developing human potential. For able-bodied people, not to work diminishes humanity, character and the nation. Meanwhile, there's much needed to be done to rebuild America. We may be waltzing around with iPhones in our hands, but the country's infrastructure is rotting under our feet. As the American Society of Civil Engineers says: "It's a mess."

In comparison to other nations, American has grown old, shabby and fat, to which we have lackadaisically grown accustomed. Most foreign infrastructure is newer than ours. They leap-frogged telephone poles to iPhones. So America can't maintain its competitive status and restore prosperity without addressing infrastructure: roads, bridges, rail, and power grid security, which is this nation's Achilles heel.

Simultaneously, solutions to all the unintended consequences of the technological revolution are needed. Globalization tightens each day. And given its velocity of change, fleet-of-foot thinking and action is needed for radical educational and institutional reform. Creativity in this free-wielding country has always been a national asset. Let's draw upon it.

However there's a paradox. In a world where all power is being centralized in national capitals, creative solutions and implementations must be driven locally. The point is that there won't ever be one American solution.

Yet there can be many American solutions generated by communities cooperating and collaborating with one another to produce vibrant economic regions. This nation is too diverse and complex for top-down solutions. So answers will depend upon whether the motivation of leaders from all community sectors can be stimulated to tackle the issue. Some will and some won't.

But the question is: Which one will we be? And speed is of the essence.

John F. Gilligan, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist, is president emeritus of Fayette Companies and past board chair of the Workforce Network, Peoria Area Chamber of Commerce and the Illinois Business Association. He lives in Groveland.