

Where is the Talent for Our New Economy?



Our “back to the future” economy must be fueled by a more highly trained and educated workforce. Therein lies one of our greatest challenges. You see, the downsizing of manufacturing operations in some of our largest corporations, coupled with the offshore movement of low-skilled jobs, has created a tremendous public misconception that technical fields like engineering, and even the sciences, are no

longer good areas for intellectual and career pursuit.

One might expect that the forces of supply and demand will naturally overcome the problem of shortages in a properly trained and educated workforce for the new economy. The raw material is there, isn't it? After all, do you know a youngster who can't program a modern electronic device or operate a modern game? Young people are unintimidated by technology. While I'm reading the directions (if there are any) my young grandson is intuitively getting whatever new toy or gadget he has to work.

But there really is a significant technical workforce challenge. Consider this. In the U.S., large numbers of students are moving into the middle school years of their education and they will graduate from college and enter the workforce in the next decade. But they are having terrible experiences in math and science education. These experiences are either turning them off about the science and engineering fields that lie ahead in the new economy, or they feel so inadequately prepared they fear failure in such fields and steer away from them. Besides, society has projected images of easier paths to prosperity. Consequently, for several years now, we have seen a steep monotonic decline in the number of high school seniors in the United States that have indicated engineering as a professional field of interest. There is also a decline (though not as great) in expressed interest in the sciences.



President Stan Liberty

Ironically, the same corporations that are downsizing are also experiencing unprecedented shortages of the workforce skills necessary to carry out their product strategies globally. The mismatch between opportunity and a trained workforce is illustrated by the governor of Massachusetts, who laments that he has 90,000 open jobs in his state and 120,000 unemployed people who don't have the technical skills required to fill those good-paying jobs.



Many of these corporations are among Kettering University's 600+ corporate partners participating in our cooperative education program. During their downsizing, these corporations continue to be significant coop employers and remain committed to training and educating their workforces in technical and manufacturing areas of need - even at the graduate level. In fact, Kettering has more coop jobs available than we have undergraduate students, and our distance-education graduate programs have strong enrollment.

The opportunities for young Americans armed with scientific and technical knowledge and skills are there now, and they are going to be even more plentiful in the future. But, the supply of talent won't be there if we don't strengthen our elementary and secondary educational system.

There are a number of ongoing efforts aimed at providing American youth with structured experiences that can facilitate the development of scientific and engineering interests. Some of the most popular are FIRST robotics for high school students and LEGO League for middle schoolers. These programs are joined by innovative curricular programs like Project Lead the Way and others that assist school systems. I sincerely hope that these programs will make a difference. But, as you can see, much more has to be done.

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