

There Is No Future For the Workplace

John Challenger

How will tomorrow's managers and supervisors lead self-directed teams whose members are spread out over multiple states? Is it even possible to lead such a group? Employers will need to prepare for this new kind of management now.

If you want a snapshot of tomorrow's workplace, bring your camera to Fremd High School in Palatine, Illinois. There you will see Motorola engineers working closely with students to solve real engineering problems. You might also take a picture of the billboards in central Florida, where Walt Disney World advertises for help.

Teens working on real-world engineering projects and billboards advertising jobs give an accurate picture of today's labor shortage. Companies like Motorola are working with high schools to attract more students to the engineering profession and to their companies, while Disney and many other firms are creatively advertising their need for help.

The impact of this shortage on tomorrow's workplace is not clear. If it continues, how will it affect the way we work in the future?

I think two key factors—population and technology—will determine the landscape of tomorrow's workplace. As I discuss how these factors can affect the next generation of

workers, I exclude the impact of economic policies, which can alter the trends in these areas.

A Continuing Shortage of Workers

I see a future economy with continued worker shortages created by consumer demand, coupled with an employment population too small to meet that demand. The next generation of workers will continue to be a scarce commodity for employers.

Traditional want ads will be replaced with "situation wanted" ads: workers will place these ads on the Internet or other media and wait for companies to call them. They will have good reason to expect a call back. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects 151 million jobs existing by 2006 and 141 million people employed. As often happens today, many of these workers will be working two jobs.

To attract new workers, companies will need to offer different kinds of perks and benefits. Money alone is not going to be the deciding factor. Businesses will need to add benefits to address the specific needs of workers.

For example, a worker who needs daycare for two young children may be attracted to an employer willing to make that service part of the compensation and benefits package. Another employee, who may need substantial help with retirement financing, may get special payroll deductions that can be directly deposited into a personal mutual fund or investment portfolio. Companies will provide free financial counseling.

Companies will no longer view benefits as companywide provisions. Instead, they may want to allocate a budget for benefits and authorize hiring managers to provide funds to employees within the limits of that budgeted amount. Such a change could affect many companies that currently provide benefit services, including major medical care.

The employer of tomorrow may wish to find alternate ways to help employees

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fund medical insurance. Because of the nature of this kind of expenditure, I see major medical insurance becoming an expense shared by employer, employee, and private or publicly funded assistance.

The need to tailor benefits will become more crucial as the demographics of the workforce change. I expect these changes to come from two diverse groups: teens and people over 50.

The teen population is on the rise. The U.S. Education Department reports that high school enrollment will jump 13 percent over the next 10 years, adding another 1.9 million students by 2007.

Another important trend is that many older workers are retiring later in life. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the number of workers aged 65 and older increased by 31 percent (3.8 million people) between 1985 and 1995. As the over-50 population rises, I suspect there will be even more workers in their 60s and even 70s.

The so-called Generation X'ers will probably become the minority age group in the workplace of tomorrow, sandwiched between the teens and the over-50 workers. Employers could face two potential scenarios: the two groups could form a strong connection, or they could

become polarized. Employers will need to avoid the polarization between teens and the over-50 workers, and to develop policies that will bring them together.

I like to use the grandparent/grandchild model. Take a close look at families with strong relationships: if the grandparents are still around, you are likely to see an intimate bond between them and the teenaged grandchildren. That bond usually develops when the grandchild is young and continues through the child's adult years.

Employers will need to find ways to bring that relationship to the workplace. One way is to let the over-50 workers know they are expected to mentor the younger employees. Pairing teens and over-50 workers on specific assignments will help build these connections. Remember, most people in these two age groups will have grandparents or grandchildren at home and should easily relate to this relationship model.

Of course, employers should not forget the problems of the generation in between. Generation X has the potential to see itself as a separate tribe needing defense against the other two groups. For this reason, companies will rely more and more on the maturity and levelheadedness of the over-50 worker to maintain a good balance among all employees.

The Impacts of Technology

The other major trend changing tomorrow's workplace will be technology, which has already made it possible for American business to become more productive. Computers and robots are now doing the work of two or three people, helping to keep total wages in check and to hold down inflation. These are the most obvious results of technology.

Less noticeable and more interesting is the impact that technology will have on the nature of leadership.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 27 percent of the civilian labor force worked flexible schedules last year. This is an increase of almost 83

percent over 1991, when only 15 percent of workers had flexible hours. These figures show that exactly when people do their jobs is becoming a less important factor than they meet deadlines.

Add to this trend the increasing number of telecommuters who work at home or in their cars, and it becomes obvious that employees need not always be at predetermined locations to get their jobs done. As long as the brain is working, the employee is working, or at least potentially.

That word “potentially” is a critical one. How will companies direct and manage a workforce that can be almost anywhere?

Before the infusion of technology into our lives, people reported to work at a specific time of day and went home at a set time, too. There was a supervisor or manager who assigned work and directed employee activity. It was understood that from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., the employee was dedicated to the job.

In our high-tech society, the worker might be taking a shower, watching “Oprah,” or having lunch with his or her daughter between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. While the supervisor is watching the evening news, the employee might be putting the finishing touches on a report needed for a presentation tomorrow morning.

Technology has shown employers that it does not matter how the employee spends his or her time as long as the job gets done to everyone’s satisfaction. This makes for a significant change in the way we function. Even workers on the assembly line are experiencing a change in workplace organization. The structure we identify as a workplace is disappearing.

Most management layers have been downsized out of American corporations during the 1990s. Today, there are fewer managers to report to and fewer decisions that require their input. The concept of empowering workers has left an indelible mark, not only on the workforce but on the marketplace as well. Consumers are expecting and getting

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better service from companies, and businesses are doing more to improve the service they give.

As technology helps companies deliver greater satisfaction to their customers, it also changes the workforce. Workers of tomorrow can no longer rely on brawn to get them a job. The days of unskilled, manual labor are fading into the past.

Today’s factories are becoming laboratories of technology. There are technical jobs in manufacturing that did not exist 10 years ago. Computers have even made an impact on the repair and maintenance field: your auto mechanic, for instance, is just as likely to hook your car up to a computer terminal as he or she is to remove your carburetor.

The result of such technological development is that new opportunities have been created for women in fields that have traditionally been dominated by men. The most recent figures compiled by the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that in 1996 almost 61 percent of U.S. technicians, engineers, sales engineers, and technical sales support staff were women. This trend is likely to continue as demand for engineering and technical jobs exceeds the supply.

Although industry leaders are attempting to attract young talent into technical areas—like Motorola, maintaining its partnership with Fremd High School—fewer students are graduating with the appropriate college degrees. U.S. Education Department figures for 1995 show a drop in the number of students completing college-level programs in computer and electrical engineering

since 1990. Yet the Commerce Department estimates that the demand for information technology workers alone will reach a million by 2005.

Factories may be hit the hardest by the lack of competent workers: in a National Association of Manufacturers survey, 88 percent of respondents reported a shortage of skilled help in at least one job category. More than half of respondents reported employee shortcomings in basic math, writing, and comprehension skills.

Training will become the next boom industry as employers are forced to take on the responsibility of educating unskilled workers. The new economy will not allow American industry to wait for the politicians to fund public education. Employers will need to become the public schools of the next generation.

These results point to what we can expect over the next 25 years. Workers will be more independent and self-directed, and companies will need to form partnerships with educators to prepare young people for the high-technology workplace.

Turning Managers into Leaders

So, what about leadership? How will tomorrow’s managers and supervisors lead self-directed teams whose members are spread out over multiple states? Is it even possible to lead such a group? Employers will need to prepare for this new kind of management now.

Today’s job descriptions are outdated the moment they are written. Most people would probably admit that their job descriptions are not accurate. So why do we keep them?

An alternative to composing the traditional job description might be to write job goals. Goals focus on accomplishments, which the company leadership can track; job descriptions focus on tasks, which are untraceable and often unimportant.

I use the term “company leaders” instead of “managers” for a reason: super-

vision of tomorrow's workers will not require managers. Managers want to control tasks in the hope of predicting outcomes. Leaders want to plant seeds in the hope of harvesting unprecedented crops. Leaders operate in the mercurial world of the poet: they are the dreamers of corporations.

The only job a leader has is to inspire greatness, then get out of the way. To do that today requires some personal contact. I do not believe, for example, that we can fully appreciate someone's leadership qualities simply by reading his or her words. We gain so much more by seeing and hearing that person utter the words. A leader's communication style and sincerity make a greater impression on us, perhaps a lasting one.

But in the high-tech world of tomorrow, leaders will have fewer opportunities to talk to people in person. They will need to rely on electronic devices to express their ideas. Perhaps the CEO will make a multimedia CD that employees can explore at their leisure. Will that kind of communication be a good substitute for personal contact?

A shop superintendent can quickly communicate with the president of the firm simply by sending an e-mail message. A decision can be made quickly and implemented in one-third of the time it used to take. But what if the president wants to convey how crucial this particular decision is to the success of the company? Can the executive do it through e-mail?

These are the demands that will be placed on tomorrow's business leaders. Their ability to convey ideas to teams composed of people working in different parts of the country will be a major challenge.

One problem the new leader already faces is the isolation of self-directed workers. With so many people working from their homes and cars at all hours, it is difficult to maintain a sense of belonging. People can lose touch with their organizations and begin to miss the normal camaraderie of the traditional workplace.

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It is critical that business leaders provide opportunities for the next generation of workers to get together periodically. This will allow employees to see each other and make direct connections. It will also give the leaders of the company an opportunity to communicate one-on-one.

I believe this sense of isolation will be serious enough to create a new job category: the director of socialization, who will be responsible for helping workers connect with each other while giving them a chance to express themselves to someone other than the boss.

The need for people to feel a part of a human organization is crucial to achievement. People want to connect with other individuals, not just electronic message pads or laptop computers. This will be just as true in 2020 as it is today.

Working for the Customer

My world exists on the edge of job creation and job destruction. My firm works with companies struggling to find the right balance between workers and need. This is no easy task, and many companies fail to do it correctly. However, the workers they shed are quickly absorbed by other firms eager to satisfy their need for growth. The result is a "just-in-time" employment system that will continue well into the next millennium. This system will force the American worker and employer to rethink ideas of loyalty and commitment. Few employers will guarantee jobs to everyone, and few workers

will be able to afford to rely on employers to develop their skills and careers.

The workplace will become an environment dedicated to fulfilling customer demand. The needs of employers and employees will be subordinate to the need to satisfy customers.

Perhaps the New Economy is really nothing more than a consumer economy. Economic growth may rely less on government and more on companies, large and small, successfully satisfying an unrelenting consumer who wants more products and services, faster and at a better price.

Our worker populations will need to be better prepared for this kind of demand. Only those workers who are adequately educated will be able to handle the ever-changing technology designed to help us compete effectively in this market of world consumers.

The current trends in population and technology challenge us to rethink our goals for education and work. We cannot hope to sustain our economic health over the next 25 years unless we ensure that every able-bodied person can effectively participate in that growth.

Like most projections for the future, mine ends with a warning: Invest in education, or suffer the consequences.

We need to commit more than money, however. We need to set education standards that will prepare the next generation to build a future. As business and professional people, we need to invest ourselves and participate in the development of these standards. We need to make them relevant to the marketplace. Only then will our investment in education bring solid returns for everyone: employers, workers, and consumers. **DM**

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