



WHICH WAY TO THE FUTURE? globalization and technology are drastically changing how we do our jobs--And that's both a promise and a problem. Michael Mandel. *Business Week* 4047 (August 20, 2007): p45. (1114 words)

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The "Future of Work" is hardly a new topic. In fact, over the past quarter century, at least 20 books have used that phrase as part or all of their title.

So with all the words spilled on this question already, why is BusinessWeek addressing it now? The answer is simple: The U.S. and the global economies are coming to a crossroads that no one could have anticipated just a few years ago. Globalization and technology together are creating the potential for startling changes in how we do our jobs and the offices we do them in. Offshoring, for one, means work can be broken into smaller tasks and redistributed around the world. And the rapid growth of broader, richer channels of communication--including virtual worlds--is transforming what it means to be "at work."

Yet despite the technological and organizational progress, it's not clear whether we should look ahead to the future of work with enthusiasm or fear. Are Americans' jobs going to become more interesting and complex as rote tasks are moved offshore or eliminated by technology? Or will managers and workers be ground down by competitive pressures that leave little time or room for creativity and innovation?

Truth is, the trends prevailing in today's workplace provide ammunition for optimists and pessimists alike.

On the positive side, employers are hiring workers with higher and higher levels of education, and jobs are demanding ever more sophistication. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 34% of adult workers in the U.S. now have a bachelor's degree or better, up from 29% 10 years ago. What's more, the modern workplace no longer resembles the factory assembly line but rather the design studio, where the core values are collaboration and innovation, not mindless repetition. Talented people are still in high demand, and there's no evidence yet that work has become less interesting because of outsourcing. "On balance, I don't think that jobs are being fragmented," says Paul Osterman, a labor economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Fully 60% of respondents to a BusinessWeek poll expect working conditions for the average person to be better in 10 years than they are now. That's according to an online survey of 2,000 U.S. executives and managers done in late June and early July. And in the same poll, 82% of respondents said that self-fulfillment will be a more powerful motivator than fear if we look 10 years out.

Then again, there are persistent signs that the gloomier outlook is gaining traction as well. Job satisfaction in the U.S. plummeted in 2006 to a record low. That's according to a survey of 5,000 households done for the Conference Board. Only 47% of workers were satisfied with their jobs in

2006, down from 59% in 1995. "The demands in the workplace have increased tremendously," says Lynn Franco, director of consumer research for the Conference Board, especially as technology has made it ever harder to get away from the job.

Even more disturbing, two decades of rising incomes for educated workers seem to have come to a halt, at least temporarily. When adjusted for inflation, the real wages and salaries of U.S. workers with at least a bachelor's degree are barely higher than they were in 2000, an unpleasant surprise in a world in which education is seen as the route to success.

The wage stagnation, combined with the 60% rise in college tuitions since 2000, seems to be discouraging many young Americans from getting a college education. The percentage of 25- 29-year-olds with at least a bachelor's degree has actually fallen during this decade. This raises the real possibility that this generation of young Americans may actually be less educated than the previous one, creating a growing gap between the kinds of people companies need and the workers who are actually available.

What can you do? Whether you are a manager or worker, this Special Report provides the intellectual tools and information you need to move toward the more optimistic vision. We'll look at the future of work--both in the short run and much farther out--from the best way to manage a global virtual team to the pros and cons of branding yourself, to the seemingly farfetched use of brain chips--yes, brain chips--to enhance your capabilities.

The first section examines work from the perspective of managers, focusing in particular on how to get an organization full of people from different cultures and backgrounds to collaborate efficiently and effectively. That's not an easy task, but we'll see how global giants, such as IBM, Nokia, and Dow Chemical, are able to accomplish it. Meanwhile, successful Indian companies--among them Infosys Technologies Ltd. and Satyam Computer Services--demonstrate how they recruit, train, and retain workers in a hyper- competitive environment.

The next section peeks into the future from the perspective of workers. We'll explain how to avoid being "Bangalored" or "Shanghaied"--that is, having pieces of your job sent overseas. Our report's reassuring message: "The offshoring trend is moving with the speed of a road paver rather than a hot rod, so there's time for alert Americans and Europeans to scramble out of the way." That means moving up the value chain to take advantage of new opportunities. It also can mean literally moving from one country to another, as we describe how Europe's mobile labor force easily crosses national borders, perhaps giving a glimpse of where the rest of the world is heading.

Finally, the third section of the Special Report considers the impact of technology on the workplace, ranging from improved telecommuting to new techniques that help sleep-deprived workers, a serious problem in many occupations. In the future, advances in communication could enable new forms of workplace organization and mass collaboration of an unprecedented sort.

Beyond that, we ask: Will this be an invigorating "new world of empowered individuals encased in a bubble of time-saving technologies? Or will it be a brave new world of virtual sweatshops...?" For example, Wikipedia, the tremendously successful online encyclopedia, harnesses the efforts of thousands of volunteers to create something of great utility to society. But using a similar innovation in a profit-making corporation carries both enormous promise and problems.

In fact, the emerging ways that the workplace is being restructured have not yet been stress-tested. They have evolved in a period of rapid global growth, and no one knows how they will react if the world economy hits a rocky patch. We have entered uncharted territory--and that's why

this special report offers guideposts rather than a Google-esque road map.

Still, when the future of work comes to pass, will it be a bright or bleak one for most people? "I'll be optimistic," says MIT's Osterman. We are, too.

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