

The New Now:

U.S. Workforce Sustainability

Faithful Addendum readers are accustomed to finding upbeat, whimsical and oddball stories about gears in this space. What follows is not about gears, exactly. Rather, it is, as opposed to the usual bleak news about America losing its manufacturing mojo—a look at a positive, hopeful development in that regard.

But first this sobering fact: By 2018 30 million new and replacement jobs will require some college education, yet there will not be available enough high school graduates with the necessary college credentials to meet the need. The no-longer-new reality is that adult workers—either currently in the workforce or those underutilized—will need to upgrade their educational skills. The obvious, long-ignored disconnect here is that while higher education programs continue as a gateway to advanced economic status, millions of American workers have insufficient education.

A positive force working to change that trend is Shifting Gears (shifting-gears.org)—a Midwest-based, manufacturing and other skills program in place since 2007 with the mission of “strengthening post-secondary, adult basic education and skills development systems so that more low-skilled workers gain the education skills and credentials needed to advance and succeed in our changing economy.”

In other words, what is needed right now is not just environmental sustainability; what is needed is workforce and family sustainability to sustain and further the goals and dreams of American middle-class workers as they face the uncharted waters of today’s world economy.

Sustainability also means having the capacity to endure, and the Shifting Gears initiative strives to help endangered workers accomplish that. Backed by grant funds from Joyce Foundation (www.joycefdn.org), a longtime Great Lakes- and Chicago-based charitable organization (established in 1948 by Beatrice Joyce Kean of Chicago, the sole heir of the Joyce family) whose mission is “igniting state leaders’ desire for change and to spark their imaginations to chart a new course for low-skilled adult workers to acquire post-secondary credentials” valued by employers in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin. (To be clear, the core work of the Shifting Gears initiative ended December 31, 2011. However, a select number of states will be continuing on in some capacity.)

Meanwhile, workers see their wages drop and families see their quality of life diminish. True, indications are that the economy is improving, whatever that means to a father or mother out of work and now contending with through-the-roof gas prices that may slow things down yet again.

But the “Great Recession” exacerbated the already bad economic outlook for the under-educated or under-trained, whose grip on a middle-class life and the American Dream has inexorably weakened over recent decades.

We’re all familiar with the “leave no child behind” mantra that promises to provide each and every child in this country with a quality education. And that is as it should and must be. But what to do about the 40- or 50-something father of four with a manufacturing job that’s about to be shipped to Mexico or China? Or Vietnam? When that happens—as it does all too frequently these days—the possibility exists that an entire family is left behind.

“Igniting” most politicians’ desire to do anything they fear doing—or don’t profit from in some way—is a very tall order. But the Joyce Foundation’s longevity in the region at the very least supplies much needed credibility to the endeavor. More significant are the foundation’s competitive grants, which help provide the necessary resources, tools and guidance to create improved and targeted educational opportunities for adult workers.

But given the monumental task at hand, the Joyce people are under no illusions that completing an initiative of this scope will come easily, and readily acknowledge it will require that “policymakers, practitioners and other stakeholders” acknowledge that “change is necessary (and that) the answers and architecture for a new world of improved, accelerated and occupationally driven education for working adults” are not “ready-made or readily apparent.”

A good many manufacturing jobs of the future—which, if you haven’t noticed, is already here—require more than a high school education. The good news is that they are attainable with a two-year associate’s degree or a short-term, post-secondary certificate. The bad news: millions of Midwesterners nevertheless lack the skills and credentials needed to compete for those jobs.

Employment in higher-skill, higher-wage jobs is the desired, ultimate outcome for the Changing Gears initiative. But realizing that outcome will require “changing and implementing” new state policies in the six-state region, which in turn will necessitate some very “heavy lifting” to get this done, which is at the very core of what Shifting Gears does.

And what businesses need in return from the workforce in this partnership is something that only changing the education and workforce preparation systems can provide: a readily available, high-tech-trained brain and labor pool. Time to get cracking, don’t you think?