

8

framing the debate

Realizing our potential will require investing in education and learning for all of our people throughout their lifetimes.

Vice President Al Gore,
January 12, 1999

TAKING STOCK AT CENTURY'S END

As America enters the twenty-first century, its economy continues to grow—and many workers and their families are sharing in this prosperity. Yet emerging technologies, globalization, and the information-rich economy are changing the working world—including the American workplace. How are the forces of change making it easier in some cases, and more difficult in others, for workers to meet their needs? Policy- and decisionmakers in both the public and private sectors should take stock of the needs of the worker and the workplace.

What are workers' needs?

First, workers need lifelong economic security for themselves and their families. They need the opportunity to obtain skills that will guarantee them high wages. Workers should be able to use technology to their advantage, without fearing that it will make them “jobsolete.” Workers should be skilled, not stuck, in the new economy.

Second, workers need to balance work with caring for their families. Some workers can be helped by onsite child care. A variable schedule enables others to care for children and aging parents. For still others, nontraditional working arrangements are the answer. But all workers need to know that they can achieve a balance between work and family without having to forego adequate earnings and health and pension benefits.

Third, workers need workplaces that are safe and fair—protected from health hazards and free from discrimination and other unfair employment

practices. In the last 35 years a great many of the barriers have fallen which prevented America's women, minority, and disabled workers from participating, let alone succeeding, in the workplace. The future workforce is destined to be even more diverse. Future employers will have the advantage of multicultural, multilingual workforces that offer new opportunities to compete more effectively in the global market.

Trends affecting future work

Future growth in occupations and industries will reflect longterm trends such as the continued rise of the service sector, but within certain industries and occupations, changes are occurring at a more rapid pace. Changes in technology, particularly in computers and telecommunications, have virtually transformed whole industries and occupations. These changes are opening employment opportunities for many, particularly those workers with disabilities. Increased global competition, due in



part to advances in communications, has increased the demand for new technologies and for the people who can imagine new ways to use them.

Skills are the ticket

Educational attainment is rising as is the demand for highly educated workers. Yet for the large portion of American workers who do not attend college, skills will still play an important role.

The majority of jobs being created today, while requiring less than an associate's degree, will require other cognitive and communication skills. Continued technological change will increase the number of occupations that require at least some technical skills. Lifelong learning will grow in importance.

The economy is booming, new jobs abound, and wages and benefits are growing. But the pattern of growth is uneven: the earnings of highly educated workers have been increasing faster than those of less educated workers for most of the past two decades.

Balancing work and family

For many working families, the balance between work and family remains elusive. Families have significantly increased their time at work and are searching for the time to spend with their children and aging parents.

In 1998, almost three out of four women with children were in the workforce—and many have daycare needs. In 1996, almost 20 percent of American households provided informal care to a

relative or friend age 50 or older. By the year 2005, this number is estimated to more than double.

Nontraditional arrangements offer both the employee and employer more flexibility than traditional jobs. Instead of a full-time, year-round job with benefits, training, and a pension upon retire-



ment, roughly 1 in 10 workers now has a fundamentally different, nontraditional working arrangement. Nearly four out of five employers use some form of nontraditional staffing arrangement.

The price of flexibility may prove to be too high for some workers. Only 7 percent of temporary workers receive health care benefits, and just 1 in 10 is eligible for an employer-sponsored pension plan.

Full-time independent contractors earn more than equivalent traditional workers. Traditional workers earn more than all other comparable categories of nontraditional workers. Agency temps'

.. we have to
create a situation in
America where
people can keep on
learning for a
lifetime, without
regard to where
they live, what their
job is, what their
income is.

President
Bill Clinton,
January 28, 1999

weekly earnings are the lowest of all alternative workers and are two-thirds of traditional workers' earnings. Nearly 60 percent of temps working for an agency would prefer traditional work.

Closing the gaps

The U.S. workforce is becoming larger and more diverse—including more people of color, older Americans, women, and people with disabilities. The availability of large pools of such workers creates the opportunity to maintain economic growth by tapping new human capital resources. Additionally, employers will be able to use America's increasing diversity to give them a competitive edge in emerging domestic and international markets.

Women have made tremendous strides. From construction sites to the boardroom, more women than ever before are working, and more own their own businesses. Yet despite these advances, significant wage gaps remain between men and women.

The wage gaps between white workers and other racial and ethnic groups have narrowed but have not been eradicated. Persons with disabilities now have greater opportunities in the workplace, but technology alone cannot close the gap between their wages and those of persons without disabilities.

Workplaces are safer and healthier than ever before, but some recently emerging problems, such as ergonomic hazards, remain and new problems arise with new technologies.

QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

We hope that *futurework* will provoke thought and discussion to help policy- and decisionmakers address the changing times and its effect on workers' needs. We offer the following questions and observations as a springboard.

On achieving economic security

How can workers get the education and training they need to keep their skills up to date and to ensure that they do not get stuck in low-wage jobs?

What incentives will keep individuals learning over the course of their worklives to bolster their lifelong economic security? How can training be delivered most effectively?

As computer networks compete with human networks in our workplaces, who will guide and mentor new workers on the job?

Unions have helped millions of Americans with less formal education achieve economic security through collective bargaining. How can they build on their success while meeting the challenges of technological change and globalization?

Technology provides flexibility in existing jobs and creates new jobs. At the same time, it can make jobs obsolete. How will policymakers, employers, unions, workers, and others manage this paradox?

On balancing work and family

How can workers balance their needs for both lifelong economic security and the resources and time to care for their families?

How can unions and employers build on and multiply successful existing programs such as onsite child care, flexible start and stop times, job sharing, and eldercare referrals?



How will workers in both traditional and non-traditional working arrangements acquire the health insurance and pension benefits they need?

On destiny and diversity

The workforce is destined to become more diverse. How can we harness the resulting opportunities for economic growth? Does difference necessarily lead to discrimination? How can we get low-wage workers “unstuck” and into better-paying jobs?

How can we adapt what we have learned in closing gaps in education, work experience levels, and wages to help those workers who remain among the poorest of Americans?

How can we remove the multiple barriers that keep many of these Americans from entering and then succeeding in the workforce—barriers such as low skills, discrimination, lack of transportation, lack of contacts in the labor market, and childcare problems?

How do we help the poorest workers achieve meaningful, longterm employment? How can we best spread the message that help is available? How do we reach those who are living on the margins of society? How do we make work pay for all Americans?

Will policy- and decisionmakers in government, labor unions, private industry, schools, and communities address the changes that are inevitable and embrace the challenge of meeting future workers’ needs?

THE FUTURE

The twenty-first century will demand innovative thinking by policy- and decisionmakers in both the public and private sectors. The key to continued growth is to make sure that all Americans share in the nation’s prosperity—that we use our abundant human resources to their fullest advantage.

We hope we have helped frame the debate for policy- and decisionmakers of the twenty-first century and look forward to the wide-ranging discussions that will follow.

**The future ain’t what it used to be.
L.P. “Yogi” Berra**

In this new economy, we have to think of family-friendly policies in a new way. Not as fringe benefits. Not as perks. But for what they really are—good ideas that are good for workers and good for business. Make no mistake. Companies succeed in the global marketplace when workers succeed around the kitchen table.

**Secretary
Alexis M.
Herman,
April 23, 1998**