

# **Major trends in the workplace**

**By Anne McDonagh**

**It has been some time since Learning Curves examined the “big picture” regarding the labour market. So we decided to take another look.**

## **Why is it important to know about trends in the workplace?**

**Trends in the workplace are not established facts and so we have to assess them warily. The future, which often looks very rosy to its forecasters, can be derailed, throw us off course and downright destroy the future we imagined for ourselves. We don't have to look back too far to realize that international events like 9/11, the corporate scandals of North America or the SARS outbreak have changed our lives as well as the future workplace in major ways. .**

**There are other reasons to be wary of predicted trends. For one thing, it is difficult to distinguish between a flash in the pan and a trend that is going to turn into a factor in the every day life of the future.**

**There are, however, some trends that have changed the workplace enormously and continue to do so.**

## **Globalization and Technology**

**Globalization and technology, for example, have been the leading trends in the workplace for some time and will continue to be. In addition, they have spawned many other trends, which will be outlined in this article.**

**(A digression: Recently the juggernaut of globalization has hit a few obstructions. The United States does not seem to be as committed to free trade, one of the cornerstones of globalization, as we might have expected, when it comes to special interest groups like farmers or the softwood lumber lobby. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that globalization succeeds mainly for multinational corporations. It hasn't done much for Africa or Latin America. Those groups are largely worse off than they were twenty years ago. And they are beginning to resent the prescriptions of the industrialized world, which do not benefit the developing world.)**

**For the time being globalization as a tool of western capitalism is still pushing on, but it may soon have to evolve considerably in order to placate the rest of the planet.**

**For most businesses, in theory at least, the combination of globalization and technology has meant that their location or size doesn't matter. Although business over the Internet has not developed as quickly as predicted a few years ago, it is gradually increasing. Businesses at every level are using the Internet as one of their sale strategies, from multinationals to individuals operating out of their homes. What does this mean for jobs? Attracting customers over the Net and protecting their transactions has created new high tech specialties, which used to be just an element of other jobs: **Web Master and Internet Security Specialist.****

**Most Canadian companies trade primarily with the United States, and our second most important trading partner is the European Union. However, Asia, particularly China, seems poised to assume a much larger role on the stage of world trade. What does this mean for Canada? With a large population of citizens of Chinese heritage and an increasing population of immigrants from other parts of Asia, Canada is in a good position to develop strong trade relations with that region. Canadians of Asian heritage will soon be considered a boon to companies wanting to extend their trade.**

**The explosion in computer and communication technologies has meant that with the touch of a button on the computer, people can order a product from anywhere in the world or move their money from one country to another. This same technology enables companies to gather large amounts of information on competitors and consumers allowing them to respond quickly to market-driven or customer-driven demands. However, companies are competing with similar companies around the world, not just with other companies in their community or country. In order to win this competition, products must be of the highest quality, meet the needs of customers and be reasonably-priced. Competition has never been so rigorous.**

**The greater emphasis placed upon quality assurance, efficiency and customer service by businesses everywhere are completely reasonable. People trained in quality assurance are in great demand. Also sought for are people with excellent customer service skills. In a**

**recent issue of Learning Curves, we highlighted the tremendous growth in jobs for customer service personnel; we also listed several community colleges and other training centres which offer certificates in customer service.**

**Technology also levels the playing field for small to medium-sized companies (SMEs). (A small company is defined as one having less than 100 employees and a medium-sized company as one having 100 to 500 employees.) SMEs don't need a large work force to produce an excellent product efficiently in smaller quantities than larger companies. By targeting a niche market at home and/or elsewhere in the world, they can make a go of it. Most new jobs today are being created by SMEs. So people looking for work should never forget the SMEs as sources of employment.**

**Technology has altered how work is done and the skills needed to do the work. Large companies and institutions have re-organized or "re-engineered" themselves. Re-engineering is a trend which makes a company less hierarchical and more team-based and is a result both of technology and of the need for competitiveness in the global marketplace. Teamwork is a major trend in the re-engineered workplace because technology allows everyone access to the same information. Managers who pass information up and down the chain of command are no longer required. Teams have much more responsibility than workers in the past had for decision-making and problem-solving. Many managers have been let go; those who remain or who have been hired are coaches of the team rather than authority figures. Good team players who take responsibility for their own and their team's work will flourish.**

**Most companies today outsource many of their activities so that a substantial number of workers are paid only for what they do, not for the time spent on the job. Providing no benefits nor job security, these companies take little or no responsibility for their "contract" workers or consultants. Outsourcing or contracting out gives companies the ability to hire only when they have work available making them much more efficient than in the past.**

**This is another trend created by technology and globalization and has had a major, often negative, impact on workers especially those who expected to stay in the same job with benefits for their entire**

**working life. In this environment, workers must see themselves as able to survive the insecurity of the workplace by developing a sense of security in their own skills. They will also have to manage money and time well because of the inevitable periods of unemployment. They will take courses in order to remain competitive. They will be able to understand the needs of the work place they happen to be in and to adjust to co-workers quickly. They will need to be entrepreneurial in spirit in order to see the next job opportunity.**

**A company's capital used to be in its buildings, equipment and inventory; now it is in its workers. Knowledge workers is the "trendy" expression used to describe the workers who are well-educated, technologically adept, able and willing to learn. These are the new elite and can name their price. Many of us may envy them, but we should remember how hard they are expected to work; while many are millionaires by the time they are twenty-five, many more burn out and find it difficult to recover. Besides the job-specific skills, these workers must have good health and excellent self-management skills.**

**Technology will continue to take away many jobs that are routine and that require little skill. Two possible outcomes of this trend are becoming apparent. If corporations continue "to call the shots", there will be an increasing division in society between the "haves" and "have nots." About twenty percent of the population will be working in "good" jobs where they will work long hours for high wages; about eighty percent of the population will eke out an existence with part time jobs and low pay. If, however, society sees that this division between the "haves" and the "have nots" is not good for either group, then the work could be divided more evenly among the population by creating a shorter work week. In this scenario, experts estimate that by 2020, the number of hours we spend working will be cut by 50%. Then we will have to figure out how to live without work being our central activity.**

### **Demographics**

**Demographics is the study of the statistical characteristics of populations. In Canada and the United States, demographic trends are creating two major changes in the workplace: the aging of the "baby boomers" and the necessity for continuing immigration.**

**Since they were born, the baby boomers (born between 1947 and 1966) have dominated society including the workplace simply because they are such a large group.**

**In the sixties they challenged society's values and created rock and roll; in the seventies and eighties they produced an inflated real estate market and the "yuppie" lifestyle. Now they are aging! In 1997 the first boomers turned fifty. As they retire, they will change everything once again. Their withdrawal from the workplace is likely to decrease unemployment because a smaller proportion of us will be working. The pressure on publicly funded pensions and services will be massive. Even if governments have the foresight to prepare for the needs of the aging population, there will be a significant increase in the demand for services to the elderly, some of which will be delivered by government and some of which will be delivered by private companies.**

**What are these demands? The current trend to keep the elderly in their homes as long as possible will require visiting homemakers and nurses, activation co-ordinators at community "daycare" facilities, people to drive the elderly to and from appointments at these facilities and so on. These are only a few of the jobs that will be available to workers. Already the number of training programs for Personal Support Worker is increasing.**

**However, before the aging baby boomers become incapacitated, they will have free time and more money than any retired generation has had before. They will want to travel and to pursue hobbies. People who cater to these interests will have plenty of work. Travel and tourism is expected to be a growth industry for some time. Sedentary hobbies are likely to be more popular with the retired boomers and their aging bodies than playing tennis. Anyone for bridge lessons?**

### **Continuing need for immigration**

**Right now it is necessary for the government to bring in approximately 250,000 immigrants a year to maintain our population and our economy, partly because of the aging boomers' leaving the workplace and partly because of the decline in the birth rate. We are simply not replacing ourselves so we have to bring in immigrants. The decline in the birth rate is evident in all parts of the so-called developed world. Our large wave of immigrants after the second world**

**war were from Europe. Europe has its own declining birth rate now and so many of our latest immigrants come from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Many of these immigrants represent a culture very different from the original Canadian culture. Many have to learn to speak English and “to learn the ropes.” There will thus be jobs for people who want to work with newcomers such as settlement workers and ESL teachers. The culturally diverse workplace requires tolerance, understanding and sensitivity on the part of all workers and will be a key quality employers look for.**

**Grasping the underlying factors in the workplace, which we call trends, is a first step in deciding where the jobs will be in the future.**

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