

HOW TO NURTURE THE CREATIVE SPIRIT IN WORKERS

In last month's column, I spoke about the potential unseating of America as the world's predominant economic player. This month I would like to be more precise by stating my belief that it is unlikely that China, or any other one country, will assume America's place, but rather that a consortium of creative urban areas around the world will. The most important fuel for economic power going forward will not be oil, natural resources, manufacturing or even computers, but creative workers. By this, I mean people who are trained to be flexible, who are able to constantly learn, who can communicate with many different types of people, and who can multi-task.

Several nations understand this, but unfortunately, the United States official policy is traveling in the opposite direction. The fact is that people are the most important resource of any nation, and dynamic people are no longer tied to any single nation because of global mobility. A professor of future trends, Richard Florida, considers creative people to be a new class of world citizens. He points to cities that offer a high quality of life, such as New York City, San Francisco, Paris, Sydney, Amsterdam and smaller nodes of cultural and educational activity, such as Cambridge, England and Iowa City, Iowa as places that recognize the need to attract people with creative energy. Does Santa Fe fit this description?

The United States, due to security concerns, has kept many talented immigrants and foreign students out of the United States and decreased our long term competitive advantage. We still lead the world in producing creative workers in fields such as technology, finance, design, scientific research, communications and entertainment, but the percentage of jobs in our country that relate to these areas is behind that of many other nations. Approximately half of the jobs in the Netherlands, Australia, Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark and Norway are flexible, requiring advanced on-the-job learning and adaptive behavior. In the United States, the number is around one-quarter. Even places in Eastern Europe such as Ukraine and Estonia have a higher percentage of creative based jobs than we do. All of this points to a more troubling threat to the U.S.'s future economic dominance, than does China's emergence as a manufacturing center of the world.

The three basic components which promote creative work are respect for openness, investment in technological infrastructure, and recognition that creative talent is the primary instigator of new business formation. It appears to me that religious ideologies seem to now make an imprint on our long range strategic decisions, thereby decreasing our global competitiveness. This has occurred in the area of scientific research, most notably in respect to stem cells, but also in the way the United States government is treating most non-citizens.

This is demonstrated by a recent decision of the United States Department of Commerce which incited the European Union to challenge the U.S.'s control of the supposedly

neutral agency which gives out Internet addresses or “domains”. Because of complaints from conservative religious groups and others, the Department of Commerce removed its support for creating a new sector of the internet, to be known as .xxx, for pornographic material. Because this action represents a politicalization of the Internet, other nations are upset and rightfully so.

The Internet is a key to fostering creative workers. If we muddy the water of free exchange of ideas, I daresay we will have to drink from a tainted well. The Internet is already controlled in China. The Chinese government blocks websites that relate to democracy or political views that diverge from the party line. In a similar way, the United States is trying to block certain content which some people feel should be suppressed. The term for suppression of the Internet is called “cantonization”. I can’t figure out if that refers to Canton, China or Canton, Ohio!

The Internet offers everyone who has a computer and phone lines the opportunity to access information. It has, in some ways, taken the place of offices, libraries, conferences, travel, mail, TV and phone. What the Internet cannot do is provide the opportunities to build personal relationships, which in business, are key.

Where do our best chances lie for producing a creative environment where Americans and others can participate in the exciting opportunities to come? We have examples of what does not work. Silicon Valley has been a magnet for creative people but at the same time, the majority of people in California have watched their economic prospects decline. Take away appreciation in home prices and people are working harder for less benefit. Many service workers, teachers, government employees, clerks, transportation and security employees are struggling to pay their rents. They cannot afford to live anywhere near their place of work. The economic chasm which divides the creative class in California, both in the Bay area and in Los Angeles, is large and getting worse.

The question of how to encourage the propagation of creative opportunities so business can flourish and at the same time afford some kind of widespread social benefit is not impossible. Cities such as Toronto, Helsinki, and Minneapolis/St. Paul that have made conscious efforts to combine an investment in technology and respect for the arts, go along with social support for all workers.

Education and the arts are two basic necessities for promoting the development of creative people. If we want to create a class of new entrepreneurs, the groundwork must be prepared. We see evidence of a contrary movement as the U.S. is dismantling public radio, diminishing support for basic research and the arts, and moving instead towards commercialization of early educational and all cultural functions.

We still seem to have an idea that people with diplomas have better ideas than those that work with their hands. This is clearly not necessarily the case, and in the new world of creative power, it becomes less true over time. The Japanese model of “Quality Circles” has been relegated to manufacturing, but as a basically democratic process whereby workers at all levels are treated equally and each person’s talents and ideas are

encouraged to be expressed, the Internet is a perfect means for allowing this type of expression and interaction. We can only hope that we come to our senses and de-politicize our nation's technology, universities, educational policy, arts and scientific research. We might then return to our roots as an economy directed by and for the people.

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