

“Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do.

Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.”

- Aristotle, Philosopher

The Maine Center for Career Preparation is a private, non-profit committed to improving the economic prospects of Maine citizens by improving the linkages between education and workforce development.

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Education Works!

Movie House Rules

By Tom Broussard

There are lots of reasons people lose their jobs.

Companies have layoffs all the time.

Companies do well and move leaving their workforce behind.

Industries do poorly, lose market share and shed workers.

New technology leaves some workers behind. Old skills are no longer needed. New skills can take a long time to acquire. As you know, the individual losing his job often has very little control over the loss.

It is against this background that I have observed another aspect of job loss that I find worrisome.

In many ways, the key issue that anchors any discussion of job loss is the length of time a person goes without work. We measure the time

(“How long have you been out of work?”) and equate short periods of unemployment as good and longer periods of unemployment as bad. When people lose their jobs they get in the familiar

unemployment line.



Like other lines we join—whether it is a line for the movies or in a restaurant—there are usually rules—social rules for managing how the line works. These rules try to keep it fair for everyone.

When you get in a line at the theater, you have every belief that as the line moves forward, you will too. People who try to cut in line will be sent back. This rule is collectively enforced since no one wants to spend their time waiting only to have some bully jump ahead with no right to do so.

You've waited patiently in line. So must they. It is only fair!

I would say that there are some parallels between the unemployment line and the ticket line. But there are some stark differences as well.

The ticket line rules are rules of fairness. The first people in line are the first people served. If you come late, you go to the end of the line. You do not cut. You do not push. It is a study in fairness. It is also a study in collective interest. Everyone suffers if anyone allows someone to cut in line. So, no one does.

The unemployment line however has a very different set of rules. In the unemployment line, those with the most skills, the most talents and the most experience go to the head of the line. The line reforms itself everyday—pretty much constantly but not based on movie house rules.

The unemployment line (this is the longest movie line you have ever seen) is measured in weeks, months and years. This line is measured in miles not blocks and years not minutes. Now imagine

how the late arrivals take their place in this line.

They join not based on when they arrived but on how quickly they are likely to leave. So new arrivals with more education, more experience and more access do not go to the end of the line. They go to the head of it.

This would have the same effect on the people in the back of the line as “cutting”

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would in the movie line. If new arrivals get to “cut in line” (and they will, based on relative education and skills) then those at the back of the line get pushed back still further. They may NEVER get their tickets.

Those who recognize that this is happening to them might give up. They are

officially labeled “discouraged” workers. They leave the labor market altogether—they get out of line.

It doesn't mean that they don't still need a job. What it means is that for some combination of skills, experience and access—or lack thereof—they are not going to be able to get a job-PERIOD. So why try? For them, the line has every appearance of going backwards.

Now, I am not advocating that movie house rules be implemented in the labor market. I am simply making the observation that the mechanics of the unemployment line means that people with fewer skills and less experience will be fighting an increasingly difficult battle for employment.

The movie house rules don't work in the unemployment line where "first come, is not first served" and the only way to get your ticket is with education and training.