

"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.

Improving the linkages between education and workforce development is our goal.

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## Stranded Workers- Castaways in the Global Economy

By Tom Broussard

I am interested in the process by which people move through the workforce. People move from job to job for many reasons, some voluntary and some involuntary. One category of worker that is of particular interest to me is what I would call the "old economy" worker.

Specifically, I am interested in long term, incumbent workers in what might be referred to as mature industries.

These industries would include shipbuilding, textiles, the shoe industry, agriculture, fishing and paper and wood products.

### Mature Industries Declining

These mature industries are typically resource and labor intensive and have been declining for twenty years or more. Their decline has largely resulted from the competition of cheaper offshore labor and technology. The paper industry hails the investment of \$325 million for a new papermaking machine while simultaneously bemoaning the

loss of jobs the efficient new machine engenders.

### Stranded Workers

While workers of all kinds wash in and out of the workforce, the impact of job loss for the incumbent "old economy" worker is particularly acute. Their immediate economic security is certainly threatened by the job loss. But more importantly, their economic future is put at risk by the certainty that they will not be reemployed in a job of similar pay or skill in the near future. These workers risk being stranded high on

the beach as the waves of cheap labor, technology and global competition wash over them and recede, leaving them without the skills, or the capacity to acquire the

necessary skills anytime soon.

The tragedy is that it doesn't have to be this way. The impact of globalization on just these types of businesses and employees is becoming more and more inevitable and therefore, predictable.

### Fear of Change

What makes this threat so dangerous to the future of workers in this category is its insidious nature. Neither the employee nor the employer is



particularly interested in acknowledging the inexorable pressure of the global environment on business. Why should they? The employer wants a well-trained, stable workforce that remains until the doors close. The employee wants a stable, high wage job and has no real interest in reflecting on the prospects of losing it.

**No Time to Learn**

Both the employer and the employee indulge in a game of denial, both wishing the problem would just go away. When it doesn't and the company finally bows to the winds of global competition, the personnel that are laid off have lost more than just their jobs. They have lost more than just their livelihoods. They have lost something that can never be replaced. They have lost the learning lead-time that no amount of retraining efforts can recoup.

They are going to be out of work for a long time and when they do get another job it will be at a salary 20% to 40% less than what they were making.

We spend twelve years through high school preparing for our first job and only two weeks preparing for the next one. The two weeks separation notice is hardly enough time to acquire the skills demanded by the new economy after being so recently beached by the old.

The difference in the skills required of the displaced incumbent worker by the new economy further confounds the transition process with issues of attitude, self esteem and compensation.

The "old economy" worker is likely to have a self image of entitlement that may be difficult to reconcile with their new circumstances. The "old economy" worker worked hard to get to this position. While they may have been responsible



previously for expensive equipment and high tolerance, exacting work, the new jobs flowing throughout the new economy are likely to be more service oriented positions. These new positions include front and back office business operations, telecenters, customer service centers, database management and fulfillment centers, and they all

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require one to use a computer. They also pay significantly less and may not value what the displaced worker accomplished in their previous life.

My theory is that the employers and employees conspire unwittingly to ignore the threat to the economic security of the employee (as well as the employer), a threat that can be mitigated by beginning the lifelong learning process while still employed. Employees with outdated skills who wait to be

discharged before beginning to upgrade those skills have waited too long. They are now a "learning lead-time" too late. They are marooned.

**Message in a Bottle**

An "old economy" employee handed a pink slip today has been handed a message that came in a bottle. They lost that job a long time ago. It has just taken a while to get to them.

The question then is; How can employees be encouraged to begin the process of lifelong learning while still gainfully employed? How can the employer become a partner in learning with these employees without feeling like to do so is to open Pandora's Box?

Employers are afraid to initiate conversations with incumbent workers about the need for lifelong learning. Employers are reluctant to acknowledge the challenges globalization poses to their business. Employers then feel that exposing their employees to these concerns may risk destabilizing workers that they still desperately need.

We must learn how to serve these two masters for this is certainly one boat we're all in together.

Workers need to prepare for their next job—employers need to acknowledge that there likely will be a next job. There is an entire fleet of bottles floating around out there with the same message and each with our name on it. Eventually, they are all going to wash ashore.

The only question is when

