



Education's Vital Role in Closing the Widening Skills Gap(s) in Today's New America

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As America entered 2020, employment was at an all-time high. Wall Street was flourishing. One of the only economic issues facing America was the pre-existing and ever-widening skills gap in our manufacturing industry. There was (and still is) a shortage of prospects possessing the technical know-how to replace the previous generation of skilled workers confidently and successfully.

Then the world handed us the COVID-19 pandemic. Unemployment is now at an all-time high, and no one could have expected or been prepared for the economic downturn caused by COVID-19.

Businesses are closing or cutting back. Jobs are being lost at a record pace. This increase in the number of willing but dislocated workers has shifted our priorities. Furthermore, there is an ongoing shift to the now-exploding industry of Supply Chain—logistics, distribution, transportation, and automation in the warehouse, specifically—creating a SECOND skills gap.

“Going from historically low unemployment to historically high unemployment in sixty days will result in both voluntary and involuntary labor market churn in the coming years. This churn will exacerbate the existing skill gap issue, with many people requiring new skills for a new economy, supply chain, and on shore manufacturing. Credentials that verify retraining in skills including automation, information technology, technical maintenance, and distribution/supply chain will be a valuable currency in America.”

- Kelly V. Wallace, KWALLA Consulting, LLC Workforce Consulting, Reynoldsburg, Ohio

As always, education is adapting and will play a major role in training both the up-and-coming workforce and the newly unemployed. It is more important than ever that a shift is made in the role education plays to provide the necessary resources and training to close these skill gaps.

“Emphasis on the need for nimble and flexible instruction will be paramount.”
- Scott Lucas, PhD
Vice President, Career & Technical Education, WSU Tech

We will continue to need incoming workers with all levels of education, whether it be right out of high school, with a Technical/Community College degree, or even with a 4-year degree, that have the knowledge and skill sets that are needed to keep a steady flow of suitable and experienced workers coming into the workforce.

“Return on Investment for the student in the future could be a very different formula for justification of education.”
- Ramona Mundwiller, Grants Administration Director,
Missouri Community College Association

IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIES UNDER NEW RESTRAINTS

More than ever, higher value will be placed on short-term training. Employers will be most interested in candidates with customized training certificates, industry-recognized national credentials, apprenticeships, and 2-year degrees. Instead of spending four or more years participating in the college experience, more students could focus on having the job-ready skills and certifications necessary to survive and be sustainable in the workforce.

“Bridging the non-credit stackable credential with the credited degree will be a technical school’s biggest asset to the student of the future.”
- Sherry Coker, Executive Director,
Ozarks Technical Community College Center for Workforce Development

Since the beginning of March, educational institutions have been learning how to operate under the “new normal” conditions. With students no longer physically in the classroom, schools are finding new ways to deliver content, instruction, and hands-on training. More emphasis is being put on implementing distance learning, sometimes called “e-learning,” into classroom curriculums. This innovative mode of delivery has existed for some time and has proven to be a successful technique.

The new coursework will combine this away-from-the-classroom, virtually delivered content with safe, hands-on training that allows for physical distancing, as well as other new safety protocols, such as students working in smaller groups or practicing one-to-one relationships with training equipment.

“We must train for the future now, and articulation (dual credit) must become a priority.”
- Scott Lucas, PhD
Vice President, Career & Technical Education, WSU Tech

“Flexible learning environments are going to be the key. The biggest adjustments will not be the content, or the student, it will be the technology infrastructure to support new modalities and the instructors’ ability to efficiently instruct a quality education.”

*- Sherry Coker, Executive Director,
Ozarks Technical Community College Center for Workforce Development*

These flipped and hybrid-format classrooms will become increasingly popular and will need to be implemented quickly to address not only the educational issues, but the social distancing challenges of delivering instruction as well.

Educators are challenged to expand their ability to be adaptive, responsive and flexible to industry needs for incumbent worker retraining as well as developing students who are ready to enter the workforce with the right skills and certifications.

DRAWING IN A WORKFORCE WITH THE RIGHT SKILLS

Today in America, there is an increase in high-skill, high-wage jobs that do not require a degree. Business and industry are desperate for skilled workers that are job ready. Students need to be exposed to the exciting career opportunities in areas that represent the skills needed in today’s workplace. There needs to be a return to Career Exploration and Career-Focused Education during middle school and early high school.

Additionally, and because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many newly dislocated workers are not going to go back to the jobs they left or were forced to leave. While job-readiness will become a larger focus in earlier levels of education, those already in the workforce will be the driving element that jumpstarts the closing of the skills gap.

Workers and students of all ages will need access to the training and certifications that are necessary for job positions moving forward. As educational institutions put more focus on industry-relevant training programs, the skills gap will begin to close.

SUMMARY

The existing and recognized skills gap within manufacturing positions in America along with the effects of the COVID-19 virus on our economy and society demands a new set of objectives for education. Specifically, an increase in dislocated workers due to surging unemployment and unprepared graduates from 4-year colleges, along with a shift in industry priorities toward logistics, distribution, and automation has now created a second skills gap.

This is an unresolved problem, and education will need to be a leader in solving it by implementing new and innovative ways of delivering theory and hands-on, skills-based education and training.

Employers will increasingly place value on short-term education, industry-recognized credentials, and training that emphasizes job-ready skills with less focus on electives. In doing so, self-sufficiency and manufacturing in America will become a driving force in the economic rebound.

The challenge looking ahead is retraining displaced workers along with urging students to consider short-term training that provides job-ready skills. Education and the American workforce were not ready for this shift; however, now more than ever, the skills gap must be filled following the new restraints caused by COVID-19, and educational institutions must play a large role in helping to implement these strategies.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lynn Crow and Brent Brinkerhoff have a combined 60 years of experience working with education to deliver curriculum and tools to train America's workforce.

Lynn currently serves as President of The Aidex Corporation and Buckeye Educational Systems and oversees a Midwest region comprised of nine states.

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