

Changing Perspectives

Every week there seems to be another article on the globalization of the economy, the challenge of overseas competition, and the inevitable exporting of American jobs. Even in the hallways of high tech, once filled with high-minded executives confident in their white-collar skills, one has begun hearing the familiar thunder of today's reality: outsourcing, off shoring, and cheap labor.

What makes us so arrogant to believe that only manufacturing jobs are susceptible to exporting? I actually thought that human beings have brains as well as hands, and the last time I checked, America didn't have any exclusivity on human intelligence. Furthermore, if we are naïve enough to think of our competitors as anything but nations full of smart, wily, eager people, quite frankly, we're toast. Honestly, do we think the world is like some global pyramid scheme, where the spread of democracy and capitalism means that we're guaranteed a slice of the collective pie?

I don't pretend to have all the answers. In fact, as a long-time member of the creative community, I thought the answer was always quite simple: ideas. Ideas were our salvation. Manufacturing could be exported. Programming could be exported. But the sheer brainpower and creativity that I held so dear could never be recreated.

I must confess that this view is in fact, shortsighted. Surely, design and creativity are no more intrinsic than riveting metal, sewing fabric, or coding information systems. In fact, overseas design schools are growing at incredible rates with new classes of designers graduating every year - ones eager to feed a world with new products and services.¹

So how *do* you protect jobs in a world of competition?

You go back to school. No, I'm not talking about retraining, retooling and polishing our collective skill sets. I'm talking about doing what the best design and management schools do well: creative problem solving.

I was once fortunate enough to have an English professor that said the purpose of education is to forget what you know.² His point was that ultimately the

¹ Curedale, Rob. "Made in China" *Innovation* (Winter 2003-04): 40. "According to Chinese government sources, China has 386 design schools, graduating an estimated 8,000 product designers a year. This has grown from only about 20 universities in the early 1980s."

² I believe he was referencing B.F. Skinner's quote: "Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten."

specific themes or symbols don't matter much (we were reading D.H. Lawrence at the time). Rather, education is the *ability* one develops to gather insight in the future.

That got me to thinking about today's latest market pressures. So often, I see us searching for the specific answers, the panacea that will solve all our ills. We look to other cities. We look to new technologies. After a while, we get so frustrated, we begin to question everything. Maybe the solution to the problem isn't some new polymer, MEMS, fuel cells or even a new convention center. Surely, all of those things play a huge part, but maybe the best solution involves a change of perspective, an education in education, if you will.

At my previous firm, our clients hired us to build web sites, design new products, and to create dazzling marketing campaigns. Often times though, we discovered the most successful solutions when we *didn't* provide what the customer originally asked for. This happened when we questioned the problem, challenged the rationale, or flipped the equation. Our customers actually appreciated this as did their own. While they may have attributed our success to creativity, I tend to think it was more akin to a process of innovation.

Moreover, while innovation on its own is an incredible thing, innovation that's consistent and repeatable is extremely valuable. Still, the whole thing about innovation is that to make it consistent and repeatable, you have to question everything. All the time. Every time.

So the idea isn't to come up with a great idea. The idea is to come up with a *system* for creating great ideas. And that's what design schools are all about. Here's a problem: figure out how to solve it. Now solve the same problem with half the materials. Or now solve the same problem, but the solution must fit in a paper bag. Or now, solve the problem and have your friend build it - blindfolded.

The fact of the matter is that in the real world, the problems are so complex that they can rarely be defined so neatly. All the while, the competitive landscape is changing so rapidly that our most valuable skills today may be rendered irrelevant tomorrow. What is needed in this dynamic ecosystem is talented people that can adapt at a moment's notice. Furthermore, our workforce needs new combinations of talents and technologies that yield unexpected solutions. "Happy accidents" don't happen in closed environments, rather, they happen when environments allow for unplanned possibilities. Finally, our organizations themselves need flexible structures that allow for unbridled creativity and speed. The rigid hierarchical structures

present in so many of today's organizations leaves them vulnerable to sweeping change.

My point is that maybe what's required in today's economy is not a thing at all. Maybe it's a process and a reputation for questioning, a curiosity about the world and how to make it better. Maybe it's not the ideas that make us great, but rather that our ideas are simply products of our greatness. Maybe the things that will drive the economy in the future are not things at all, but new ways of problem solving.