

Council on Competitiveness Report Makes Recommendations for National Skills Agenda

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(SSTI Weekly: 2-4-16) As long-term trends continue to impact the U.S. economy and its recovery from the Great Recession, more must be done to develop diversely skilled and adaptable workers, according to a new report by the U.S. Council on Competitiveness.

In addition to describing the radical changes facing the landscape for America's workforce, WORK: Thriving in a Turbulent, Technological and Transformed Global Economy provides numerous recommendations on how to best respond to these challenges. Ultimately, the WORK report views itself as a roadmap to align education and training to 21st century skills needs, effectively leverage intellectual capital, and supply businesses with the talent needed to compete globally.

Although American workers have struggled in the years following the Great Recession, the U.S. labor force is also heavily impacted by several long-term trends. Even though agriculture, mineral extraction, and manufacturing drove the U.S. economy in the 19th and 20th centuries, it is driven by knowledge, technology, and innovation (KTI) in the 21st century.

While the U.S. has the highest concentration of KTI industries among major economies, this has also led to a polarization in the labor market. Demand has grown for both high-end workers for jobs involving non-routine cognitive tasks ... and for low-skill/high-touch workers, but has stagnated for many middle-skill workers, according to the report.

Macroeconomic trends such as globalization, trade liberalization, and the digital revolution have complicated this as skilled individuals from around the globe can now compete to perform the world's work, oftentimes for lower wages than American workers.

As the digital revolution continues to spur disruption, the rise of machines, and large-scale technological changes, skills and labor markets must be flexible to respond to changes in demand.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations to address the challenges of new workforce realities intrinsic in today's highly productive, dynamic, and knowledge-driven economy. As a complement to two strategic plans developed by the Obama administration - A Strategy for American Innovation ... and A National Strategic Plan for Advanced Manufacturing - WORK also recommends the development of a National Skills Agenda to help ensure the employability of Americans in an era of rapid change and an increasing demand for skills.

Because it is difficult to predict what the jobs of the future might be, the report recommends encouraging real-world skills and experiences that help build a foundation for success in a highly skilled knowledge and technology-driven global economy.

Pillars of technology-based economic development, such as the development of science and engineering skills through STEM education and the nurturing of the next generation of entrepreneurs, are also recommended.

Other recommendations include better communication channels for industry to communicate its needs to educators, students, and job seekers; continued engagement of the aging workforce; and, establishing pathways to transition veterans into the workforce.

The report also emphasizes the importance of a new era of sustainability and energy innovation as an opportunity to boost U.S. employment in a variety of new, well-paying jobs for high/medium/and low-skill workers alike. To take advantage of this potential growth, the report recommends teaching and developing skills in sustainability, committing a portion of the federal government's R&D budget to energy-related fellowships, and scholarships for students who commit to serving in an energy-related career.