

Workforce in 2000: More women, fewer unionists

This is the last of 15 articles exploring "Working: Changes and Choices." This series was written for *Courses* by Newspaper, an extension program of the University of California, San Diego, originating from the National Endowment for the Humanities' 1981 by the Regents of the University of California.

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special writer



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The year 2000 is gaining on us. Almost everyone who will be in the workforce then has already been born.

Thus, as Americans attempt to plan careers, businesses, and families, they are not being unduly "futuristic" when they wonder what work opportunities will exist at the dawn of the second millennium. What kind of jobs will be available? And in what number?

Crystal-ball gazing is risky business. One never knows what unexpected developments may occur, or how people will react to social and economic changes. Nevertheless, one can make some informed guesses based, in part, on existing trends.

LET'S BEGIN with what we know about the future with greatest certainty.

First of all, apart from some real demographic "surprises" — such as a sudden surge in immigration or sharp drop in mortality rates — we already know approximately how many men and women will be of working age at the turn of the century.

But the size of the workforce is more difficult to predict; it will depend on how people will divide their time between work and other activities, such as school, homemaking, and leisure.

Historically, teen-agers, women and the elderly have been less likely to work than adult men, but these patterns appear to be changing. We cannot assume that the future will repeat the past.

IN RECENT years there has been a large influx of women and teen-agers into the job market, while adult men, especially blacks and those over 55, have been working less.

More than half of all adult women, including many married women with young children, are now in the labor force. The marked rise in their propensity to work is usually attributed to smaller families, more education, higher wages (which increase the cost of staying home) and the revolution in attitudes toward women's roles.

Men, in turn, are working less because of greater affluence and the availability of more generous Social Security benefits, pensions and disability insurance.

Whether these trends continue will depend on how many new jobs the economy produces, evolving social mores and shifts in government policy.

There is currently no hard evidence to support the belief of "supply side" economists that reducing people's taxes, and thereby increasing their take-home pay, unleashes a flood-tide of work effort.

BUT GOVERNMENT policies can affect the decision of whether or not to work.

For example, retirement decisions often depend on the age at which one becomes eligible for Social Security. That age is likely to be raised in response to the fiscal squeeze a greying America will be putting on the system.

This change in policy together with such factors as greater longevity and continued inflation which erodes people's savings could easily reverse the present trend toward earlier retirements.

Taking some (although not all) of these factors into consideration, government statisticians estimate that, by the year 2000, the labor force will be almost one-third (about 31 million people) larger than it is today.

It will also be older, with the average age increasing from 35 to 38 years as the baby boom generation matures.

Today, only about one-fifth of the labor force is unionized. While there has been a sharp increase in unionism among public employees, this has been more than offset by declines in the private sector.

WHAT KINDS of jobs will be available to this larger workforce?

In the past, education qualifications have been a major determinant of the kind of work one secured, and the educational level of Americans has risen steadily. Since 1960, for example the average number of years of education of the workforce as a whole rose from 12.0 to 12.6, and the proportion of adults 25 years or over that has completed high school increased from 41 to 68 percent.

But the proportion of 18- to 19-year-olds going to college has dropped since the early 1970s, and the government projects only a marginal improvement

in educational attainment in the next 10 years.

WHY HAS the American drive toward ever-higher levels of schooling slowed down?

Currently, an oversupply of educated young people has lowered the extra earnings to be expected from attending college and has bumped college-educated youth down the occupational ladder.

Over the past decade, for example, the proportion of employed college graduates working professional and technical jobs fell by 9 percent among men and 16 percent among women. Job opportunities in these occupations simply have not kept pace with the number of college-trained workers.

Moreover, with the exception of a few fields such as engineering and nursing, professional and technical job opportunities are not expected to grow particularly rapidly over the next decade.

Clerical, sales, and service jobs, on the other hand, are projected to increase at an above-average rate. But these are not the kinds of jobs to which college graduates have traditionally aspired.

STILL ANOTHER significant trend is the decline in unionization since the mid-1950s.

Today, only about one-fifth of the labor force is unionized. While there has been a sharp increase in unionism among public employees, this has been more than offset by declines in the private sector.

This trend is partly related to the changing demographic and industrial composition of the labor force. Women and educated workers are notoriously difficult to organize. Blue-collar workers are more willing to organize than white-collar workers.

A reversal of this trend seems unlikely, because labor law reforms which have recently had little political support

OF MAJOR significance for both work and family life is the tremendous rise in the number of two-earner and single-parent households, a phenomenon that is related to the influx of



Geoffrey Moss—political illustrator syndicated with the Washington Post Writers Group

women into the labor market.

In 1960, 43 percent of all households consisted of a married couple with only one spouse in the labor force. By 1975, this had dropped to 25 percent, and by 1980, it is projected to be only 14 percent.

When both parents work outside the home, they want jobs that offer shorter or more flexible hours, that are closer to home, and that make provision for the inevitable conflicts that arise when home repairs, shopping, or sick children compete for their attention.

In the future, employers may thus be forced to offer more paid time off for these activities, day care "flextime," and similar working conditions.

Even so, families of the future will have a much harder time juggling their multiple responsibilities. Young couples will have to choose between the higher income that two paychecks provide and the possible benefits to children of having one parent at home.

ANOTHER PROBLEM will be the difficulties that job-related transfers from one city to another pose for two-career families.

Firms that have traditionally moved managers around the country may find that younger professionals are unwilling to jeopardize a spouse's career by frequent moves.

Finally, there are crucial questions of whether there will be enough jobs for all those who want to work, whether they will be satisfying jobs, and whether they will pay enough to keep intact the American dream of ever-rising standards of living.

Here our crystal ball becomes especially cloudy. Yet if one squints, there is some reason for offering an optimistic forecast.

CURRENT DIFFICULTIES including high rates of both inflation and unemployment coupled with a slowdown in the growth of productivity and in the

standard of living cannot be ignored.

Nevertheless, history suggests that, over the longer run, the economy eventually adjusts to absorb a growing population and labor force. Moreover, each generation has been better off than the previous one, as rising levels of educational attainment together with better technology have improved productivity and eliminated the least desirable jobs.

Over this longer period, the basic limits on what our economy can produce and consume are set by the talent and training of the population and their desire to work, not by short-run fluctuations in the level of spending and prices.

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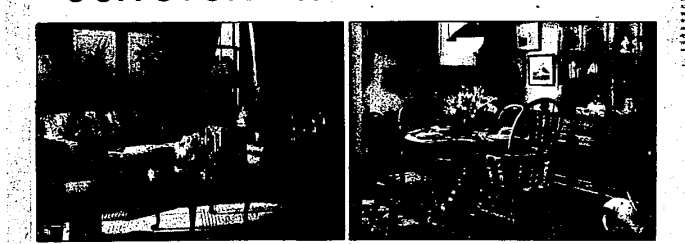
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