

POINTS OF VIEW

It's time to invest in the skills of our workers

The piece in the Sunday paper got it right: The productivity gains in the auto industry that have fueled a 10-year run of increased output and improved profits are just about to run out.

Following the trail first blazed by Toyota, the American auto companies—Ford, Chrysler, General Motors—started introducing all kinds of snazzy technology to the assembly line. Computers managed just in time parts deliveries and monitored quality control. Robots replaced workers in all kinds of tasks, ranging from welding to painting.

As the UAW knows all too well, the net effect of all this investment was to increase productivity and reduce the need for labor. While output has remained high, the number of labor hours required to make a car has dropped all across the board, resulting in historic high profits for the auto companies.

But most of the low-hanging fruit of productivity increases has been picked, now that the computers and robots have been on the line for a while. Any further increases will have to come by the slow, cumber-

some process of working effectively with the labor force to see what tiny steps in the manufacturing process can be continuously improved.

Ah, yes, as they say at GM headquarters, the labor force. With unemployment at all-time low levels, Michigan is now facing an absolute shortage of skilled labor. Companies are beginning to wise up to the fact that getting and training productive workers will be among the greatest challenges over the next decade.

So it is with some astonishment that I noticed that the Congress actually did something sensible this month and passed something called the Workforce Investment Act. The product of five years of bipartisan work, the new law will recast the country's job training system to encourage individual workers to get the skills they need to get and keep high-paying, productive jobs in the new economy.

Gone will be the 60-odd programs that used to produce a bureaucratic maze. In will be one-stop job training centers; anybody ever see a simple, easy-to-use listing in the local telephone directory, Job Training, located



PHILIP POWER

in local communities, supervised by consolidated local workforce boards?

During the 1980s, I served as the chair of the Michigan Job Training Coordinating Council, the main state body dealing with job training, at one point becoming (inadvertently) the nation's longest-serving JTCC chair. It was frustrating work because of all the unbelievable bureaucracy produced by the federal law. But it was exciting, because we got to focus on the big issue, investing in human capital that underlies all gains for both workers and corporations.

At one point, a number of us realized that the federal law had things backward. In traditional top-down thinking, it assumed that if you

inflicted job training on workers, eventually they would want training. Wrong, of course. Because there was no incentive, there was no buy-in from workers.

Some of us even argued at that time that a better way of doing things was to re-jigger the unemployment compensation system and provide workers that had lost their jobs with vouchers that could be spent on training that could get them back to work. Possibly because it included use of the dreaded word, voucher, the idea provoked a lot of resistance.

But just after Bob Reich was appointed President Clinton's first secretary of labor, some of us went to see him to pitch the idea of incentive-based job training vouchers. He bought the idea, and it has at last emerged in the new bill as Individual Training Accounts.

As is the case with any large piece of federal legislation, there are lots of complicated provisions in the Workforce Investment Act. But the fact that the act focuses on the key thing—investing in the skills of our workers—is altogether worthy of praise and admiration, especially at a time when

But the fact that the act focuses on the key thing—investing in the skills of our workers—is altogether worthy of praise and admiration, especially at a time when cynicism toward the political system abounds.

cynicism toward the political system abounds.

That's why the conference on labor force training and productivity, jointly sponsored by Oakland University and Public Policy Associates, is so timely. It will take place on Wednesday, Sept. 2, at the Northfield Hilton in Troy. I'll be giving the luncheon keynote. If you want more information, just call (248) 370-3125.

Phil Power is chairman of Home-Town Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 863-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail: ppower@ecoonline.com

LETTERS

Thanks a lot

I wanted to write you a letter to recognize and thank you and your staff for what you've done. Some of the articles were published July 24, 1997 A1; and Aug. 3, 1997 A1 and A2; Sept. 25, 1997 A1 and A6; Oct. 19, 1997 A1 and A3; Dec. 25, 1997 A5; Jan. 1, 1998 A1; Jan. 8, 1998 A1; Feb. 22, 1998 A1 and A5; April 19, 1998 A3; just to name a few that the family has kept. In case you haven't remember or know what happened, I'll give you a brief summary:

It was July 23, 1997, and I was

babysitting three neighborhood kids.

The 4-year-old boy had a swimming lesson, so we all walked three blocks to the nearby pool, the Farmington Glen Aquatic Center. The 6-year-old girl and 18-month-old girl and I went to play in the kiddie pool. The baby got very fussy, so I told the girls to get out of the pool and stand away from me. Today I'm very grateful they did. I went to get the baby some cereal and as I bent over, a 40-foot-high, 8-foot-wide tree branch decided to fall on my head, knocking me down, and I hit the cement.

I was clinically dead for two min-

utes and in a coma for two and a half months.

Now I'm trying to regain the life I once knew. I definitely need to thank you because when I was in my coma family and friends were very concerned. They all said that when they read the articles in the newspaper, it would make them feel stronger to know that I was improving.

People don't usually realize how hard it is to do things that they find easy. When I was still in the wheelchair, people would stop in the middle of an aisle not knowing that I was there, because I wasn't at eye level.

They also ran into me when I was using the walker because they thought I was too slow. There were a lot of doors I couldn't open or restrooms I couldn't use, and almost always someone would park in the handicapped parking spot.

Some handicapped access areas might be considered an eyesore, but they not only help handicapped and disabled people, but also gives the elderly people a little extra hand if needed.

I also wanted to thank you for informing people about the upcoming blood drives. Without all the blood

donations I wouldn't be here today. I also think it's a good idea to keep people informed of upcoming blood drives because a little bit goes a long way.

I think that everybody should try being disabled for a day to see what some of us have to go through. If they did, maybe they would improve some of the little things they don't realize. Thanks again.

Melissa Garr
Farmington

DOGS! Bring your owners and sniff around the most extraordinary bakery in town!

A FREE PUPPINE to the first 50 dogs. Drawings for a whole kitten kaboodle.

Three Dog Bakery
THE BAKERY FOR DOGS

It's a Pawty!

GRAND OPENING

Saturday
August 22nd
from 10-6

Sarah

Gracie

Dottie

Through-out the day Special Drawing for Gracie's Grandest Gift Basket.

Cele "bark" our GRAND OPENING

Come meet Dan, Mark & The Girls

Dogs! Bring your owners & join WNIC's
Linda Lanci for the Sarah, Gracie & Dottie look-alike contest.
Saturday, August 22, 12-2 p.m.

Special prizes for dog and owner look-alikes, too.

Plus, get \$1.00 off any purchase of \$5.00 or more with this coupon. Expires 8-31-98

223 E. Maple • Birmingham • (248) 723-1582

TALK A LOT?
NOW IT'S AS LOW AS 9¢ A MINUTE!

Free nights & weekends for 18 months AND Free ClearPath digital phone		
1200 monthly minutes	600 monthly minutes	300 monthly minutes
\$99/mo.	\$65/mo.	\$45/mo.
ONLY 9¢ A MINUTE	ONLY 11¢ A MINUTE	ONLY 15¢ A MINUTE



CLEARPATH™
SO CLEAR, IT'S LIKE YOU'RE THERE

Pagers as low as \$39.99

Ameritech.

In a world of technology, people make the difference.

ASK ABOUT CONTROLLING COSTS WITH OUR MULTI-LINE PACKS.

Available at over 400 locations, including the following SEARS stores:

Ann Arbor Brimwood Shopping Center 900 Brimwood Circle 734-994-0381	Novi Twelve Oaks Mall 27600 Novi Road 248-349-2216	Troy Oakland Mall Shopping Center 300 W. 14 Mile Road 810-397-0900
Dearborn Eastland Town Center 18900 Michigan Ave., Ste. 5 313-441-1520	Royal Oak Macomb Mall Shopping Center 32123 Grandview Avenue 810-293-2008	Warren Summit Plaza 435 N. Telegraph Road 248-706-0630
Flint Crescent Valley Shopping Center 2191 S. Linden Road 810-733-2028	Westland Beverly Hills Mall 14100 Lakeside Circle 810-532-0450	Westland Westland Center 35000 W. Warren 734-761-5008
Livonia Lincoln Park Shopping Center 2100 Southfield Road 313-397-0663	Livonia Livonia Mall 20200 W. Seven Mile Road 248-471-7327	

THREE YEARS IN A ROW
HIGHEST OVERALL CUSTOMER SATISFACTION
AMONG CELLULAR USERS IN DETROIT

CALL 1-800-MOBILE-1™
for additional locations near you.
www.ameritech.com/wireless