POINTS OF VIEW

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

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 companie
Ford, Chrysler, General Motors – started introducing all kinds of snazzy technology to the way ambly 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

As the UAW knows all too well, the not 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 han dropped all across the board, resulting in historic high profits for the delta companies.

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, cumbersome 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. Companie 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 actu-ally 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

w economy. Gone will be the 60-odd progra Gone will be the 60-oda 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 tele-phone 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 chair of the Michigan Job Training Coordinating Council, the main state body dealing with job training, at one point becoming (inadvortently) the nation's longest-serving JTCC chair. It was frustrating work because of all the unbelievable bureaueracy produced by the federal law. But it was exciting, because we got to fecus on the big issue, investing in human capital that underlies all gains for both the dig issue, investing in normal re-tral that underlies all gains for both workers and corporations. At one point, a number of us real-ized that the federal lew 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

Some of us even argued at tha time that a better way of doing things 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 provided a before the fregistance. voked a lot of resistance.

voked a lot or 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 Testing Accounts. 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 fa 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 werthy 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, Sopt. 2, at the Northfield Hillon 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 wice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail: ppower@oconline.com That's why the conference on labor

LETTERS

Thanks a lot

wanted to write you a letter to rec-egnize and thank you and your staff for what you've done. Some of 1497 Al; and Aug. 3, 1997 Al and A2; Sept. 25, 1997 Al and A6; Oct. 19, 1997 Al and A3; Dec. 25, 1997, A5; Jan. 1, 1998 A1 and A5; April 19, 1998 A3; just to name a few that the family has kept. In cease you don't remember or kept. In case you don't remember or 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 grit and 18-month on giri min 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 on my head, knocking me down, and I

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 con-cerned. They all said that when they read the articles in the newspaper, it would make them feel stronger to

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 wheel-chair, 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

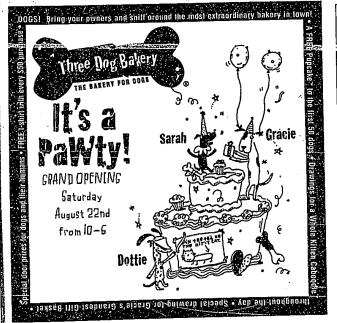
lot of doors I couldn't open or restrooms I couldn't use, and almost always someone would park in the handicapped parking spot.

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

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 peo-ple 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 at though I them.

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



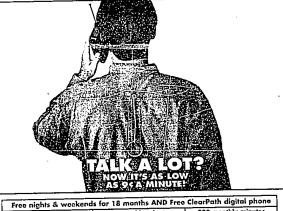
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