

Jobs For All: Can it be a Reality?

**By Marlene Seltzer
President, Jobs for the Future**

In November 2001, in Perth, Australia, WORKING VISIONS: THE INTERNATIONAL EMPLOYMENT FUTURES CONFERENCE AND KNOWLEDGE EXPO provided an international forum to grapple with questions about employment in the future and the training and preparation needed for the new world of work. Hosted by the Western Australian Department of Training and Employment, the conference brought together international, national, and state policymakers and decision-makers from government and the private sector.

Joining leading labor market analysts and practitioners from around the world, Jobs for the Future President Marlene Seltzer participated in a plenary debate on the question: "Jobs For All: Can it be a Reality?" Seltzer discussed the practical and systemic changes needed to provide full employment in today's new economy. She joined with Donald Lee of the United Nations and Stephanie Mayman of Unions Western Australia, to argue "Yes we agree but..." Arguing for the position "Yes it can happen by..." were futurist John Naisbitt, Bob Gibbs of the University of Nottingham, and Charles Brass of the Future of Work Foundation.

*Seltzer began with the following remarks. To hear the entire debate, go to:
<http://highway1.tv/workingvisions/jobs4all.htm>*

I'd like to share I'd like to share with you my observations regarding the U.S.'s economic experiences of the '90s, which I believe will shed a great deal of light on this question of whether jobs for all can be a reality.

During the decade of the '90s, and up until the recent terrorist attacks, the U.S. experienced the longest period of economic prosperity in its history. Our unemployment rate reached record lows bottoming out at 3.9 percent, labor productivity reached record highs, and job growth was unprecedented. Over 20 million jobs were created. One could argue that we did, in fact, create "enough jobs for all," but the sober reality is that not all individuals participated equally in this prosperity.

Three interrelated challenges stubbornly persisted during this period that prevented all from prospering. These are the uneven economic playing field for the less skilled and undereducated, the rise of the digital divide, and the lack of access to access to quality work and family supporting jobs. I'll briefly address each one of these.

- An uneven playing field for youth and adults with poor education and outdated job skills persisted and in some cases widened.

In our global, knowledge-based economy, those with college education and high-tech skills have prospered, while the economy's increased demand for high-skilled workers have been left behind those with a high school education or less.

Paradoxically, employers go looking for skilled employees. Earning a postsecondary credential is absolutely critical in order to earn a middle class income, and this premium on higher education will only increase over time. Economists predict that by 2008 jobs requiring a bachelor's degree will grow by 24 percent, and those requiring post secondary technical training will grow by 31 percent.

It is estimated that In America, if you are born black, Hispanic, or into a family earning less than \$25,000 per year, there is less than a 6 percent chance of getting a four-year degree.

As we become a more culturally diverse, and if we believe that our people are our greatest asset, we need to reverse these inequalities by making education affordable and accessible to all Americans, and particularly to people of color, linguistic minorities, and recent immigrants.

But that is not enough. Until our education and training systems are redesigned to accommodate the needs of working people, and revamped to be more flexible and responsive to the skill demands of the new economy, the problem of an undereducated class will persist, and high-skill jobs will remain vacant.

- Combine the cumulative effects of the education and skills deficit with the rise of the "digital divide," and the problems of equal access to economic opportunity and widening income disparity become more of a reality.

Although we have made some progress In the United States at closing the digital divide, substantial gaps along racial, ethnic, and income lines remain. If you visit schools with high poverty concentrations, you'll see this disparity: only 39 percent of instructional rooms have Internet access, compared with 67 percent in more affluent schools.

We know that access to information technology and computer literacy are critical to getting a job and advancing in employment: 60 percent of jobs in today's economy require these skills, and people who use computers on the job earn 43 percent more than other workers.

I can easily envision the gap between the "haves" and "have nots" widening even more if the digital divide persists. We must implement strategies that bring the Internet to every home and school in the world.

But training is not enough either. We must work pay for people who work hard and live by the rules.

For example, our nationally touted, work-centered welfare reform initiative has moved over 1,000,000 people off of welfare and into employment since 1997. However, getting into work didn't mean getting out of poverty for many of these people. Over two-thirds joined the ranks of the working poor.

The challenge is to help the working poor advance out of poverty by providing access to higher-quality jobs.

- This requires an education system that is family and work friendly and makes it easy for individuals to continually learn. It also requires a strong set of public policies that encourage business investment in low-income workers and public income subsidies while being trained.

The economic fallout from the terrorist attacks is mind boggling. In October, we lost 439,000 jobs, the largest one-month loss in the past 20 years. And those who are getting hardest hit are the low-income, working families.

Recessionary times will always happen, but our safety nets needed to be stronger to weather these economic hardships, and we need to use this “downtime” to help workers gain skills they need to be able to compete when the economy rebounds.

These challenges, if left unresolved, will make it virtually impossible for everyone in the future to reap the benefits of a growing, knowledge-based global economy. More than ever, we need to tackle these stubborn and persistent issues of education inequities, the growing digital divide, and access to quality jobs by creating changes in policies, programs, and systems that “even out” the playing field and meet the ever increasing skill demands of the new economy.