

“Why is it any ‘better’ to graduate from a university than from a vocational school? It isn’t, and society needs to come to grips with this reality.”

IT’S GETTING SCARY OUT THERE

Being a glutton for punishment I took myself off to the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas early in January. I subject myself to the agony of endless slot machines and neon everything because the Show itself is truly international, has the latest of literally almost everything and is therefore a good window on where technology is heading. Or rather, taking us.

Frankly, I am increasingly worried about the pace of change and the impact it will have on our region, the global economy and its social implications.

As I cruised the Show and considered the vast array of small companies competing for attention, I wondered how on earth any of them really understood how to clearly differentiate themselves in whatever service or product they were offering. It became abundantly clear that they can’t. One of the reasons for this is because the ecosystem is becoming increasingly dominated by the big names: Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon. If you don’t have a plan to fit into their various areas of control or influence, you are essentially betting on being able to compete with them. The odds at the slots are better than that. Let me be more specific: I learned there are now 100 million devices connected to Amazon’s Alexa and by year’s end, it will likely be 250 million. If you have any sort of consumer device or service offering you need to make it Alexa friendly. If you don’t, you will simply be irrelevant.

There are something like seven million unfilled job opportunities in the U.S. at the moment, likely a proportionate number in Canada. This demonstrates the complete mismatch between the education system and the marketplace. The latter is moving quickly; the former at a glacial pace. An undergraduate degree, while providing knowledge and helping mature the ability to use one’s mind, does not teach an employable skill. We need honesty about what job opportunities align with which programs so students are more aware of the job prospects which accompany their academic preferences. We need, at the high school level, to begin the process of identifying market needs so students can incorporate that knowledge into the decisions they make about their future. Quite simply, the education system needs to be more focused on teaching relevant skills. And students need to be given insight into what is relevant.

My generation grew up with the idea that a skill provided lifetime employment, often with a single employer. Such jobs still exist but increasingly the marketplace needs skills which

are almost spontaneously identified and required. Think about opportunities in voice recognition or artificial intelligence. These were not mainstream technologies five years ago but today the demand is almost insatiable. Given that the education system as we know it can hardly keep pace, this means companies have to become an integral part of training and re-training. Talent recruiters are increasingly on the lookout for candidates who show an inherent talent for adaptation, a natural curiosity and inquisitiveness—the sorts of soft skills which imply a readiness and ability to learn quickly. Make no mistake, this will leave a lot of folks behind. But this leads me back to the basic principles of education. We have to move away from conferring undergraduate degrees to teaching employable skills. Community colleges and vocational schools need to be celebrated in the same way as universities. Why is it any “better” to graduate from a university than from a vocational school? It isn’t, and society needs to come to grips with this reality.

So why am I so worried? Because I see fractures in society which are dangerously alienating. The gap between the ultra-wealthy and the less well-off is increasing. Too often, the perceived remedy is a call for higher taxes on the upper end when this in fact does nothing for those who lack employable skills. But I don’t want this to be about taxes or tax rates. Rather, this should be about how we all focus on making change work for us, how we force change in our institutions and in our thinking. But that’s not what’s happening. Canada used to stand proudly in the middle, sometimes a bit left of centre, sometimes a bit right, but definitely not on either extreme. We need to stop pointing fingers and re-centre this country so we can all work together.

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FEEDBACK

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