

Maine Voices: Maine's workforce challenges call for bold public strategies

A concerted multi-pronged approach is required to address workforce shortages, which ought to be high on the new governor's priority list.

BY JOSEPH W. MCDONNELL SPECIAL TO THE PRESS HERALD MAY 15, 2018

In Shakespeare's "Henry V," the king's cousin laments the undersized English army as it prepares to battle the French at Agincourt and wishes for "but one of the ten thousand men in England who do no work today."

Maine's employers increasingly find themselves in the same position, lamenting the shortage of available workers as they struggle to find qualified employees. The situation may get even worse as more and more highly skilled baby boomers reach retirement age.

A [study last year](#) by two former Maine state economists projected that Greater Portland, with the state's strongest economy, [will see its labor force decline by 5,000 by 2034](#) unless extraordinary steps are taken to reverse the trend. Maine employers with locations outside the state are actively growing their workforce in those locations because they are unable to find qualified employees here.

Meanwhile, Cumberland County's unemployment rate has dipped to 2.3 percent, nearly 70 percent lower than the national average – although some 30,000 men in Maine in their prime work years remain outside the workforce without seeking employment.

A concerted multi-pronged strategy is required to address the workforce shortages, which ought to be high on the new governor's priority list. Such measures include:

- Bringing more immigrants into Maine, especially those with skills.
- Attracting young workers from other states, including those who grew up in Maine and moved away.
- Attracting out-of-state students to Maine and engaging them with Maine employers.
- Stemming the outflow of Maine college graduates by offering incentives such as college debt forgiveness.
- Ramping up internships, apprenticeships and work-study projects to link young people with Maine employers.
- Increasing the skilled-labor pool by getting more than the current 62 percent of high school graduates to attend community colleges or universities.

Many of these strategies are already underway, although not at the scale required. Even at scale, these measures may run into head winds because of the work world's rapid disruption. Much has been made of trade and immigration as the culprits upending industries and jobs. But these are minor factors compared with automation and artificial intelligence.

A McKinsey study has found that [45 percent of work activities could be automated](#) with current technologies. We have become familiar with robots replacing factory workers and kiosks and scanners replacing clerks. Over the next decade, low-skilled jobs will increasingly become casualties of automation, and high-skilled jobs will no longer be immune as computer algorithms replace

professionals in law, medicine and finance. Ironically today's workforce shortages will accelerate the adoption of automation.

It's easy to imagine a dystopian scenario with automation exacerbating economic inequality as AI benefits businesses at workers' expense. The historian Yuval Noah Harari [warns](#) of the rise of a useless class. Developing a more highly skilled workforce offers the most sensible strategy to address the workforce shortages and disruption from artificial intelligence.

One hundred years ago, as the country shifted from agriculture to industry, it faced a similar crisis with shortages of trained workers. Two camps emerged to address the problem. One, led by John Dewey, responded with problem-centered education to train future workers how to learn to continually adjust in a dynamic world. But Dewey's vision lost out to an educational system that split into a vocational arm for job training and a liberal education arm for critical thinking and civic interests.

In "Robot-Proof: Higher Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence," Northeastern University President Joseph Aoun has sought to address today's workforce challenges by reimagining higher education, adopting Dewey's vision of marrying creativity and critical thinking with vocational education.

Aoun offers three proposals to better prepare students for the needs of today's employers: 1) a curriculum that educates all students in data, technology and human literacy along with capacities in entrepreneurship, systems thinking and cultural agility; 2) joint curricular development with employers to align educational outcomes with workforce requirements; and 3) an educational system that provides those in the workforce with continual upgrading of skills, recognizing that in a rapidly automating world, no job will be robot proof (the title of his book notwithstanding).

Maine's next governor should offer a bold strategy to increase the skills of the state's workforce, including building on Aoun's recommendation to forge a radically new relationship between employers and educators.

The English prevailed at Agincourt by forcing the larger French army to attack through a narrow, muddy passage, which undermined the French advantage. Maine requires equally imaginative strategies to overcome its workforce challenges.

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