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Lifelong learning key to employability

Paul Grasso

— For the unemployed, there is a distressing aspect of the "Great Recession" that many have yet to face. The truth is that, unlike past recessions, many of the jobs lost during this recession are lost forever and are not coming back. Ever.

As the economy began weakening in 2008, employers began laying off employees that in all probability would have lost their jobs due to advances in technology, international trade and jobs being shipped overseas, regardless of the economic downturn; jobs such as administrative assistants, travel agents, advertising and public relations professionals to name a few. Employers likely would have phased out these jobs more humanely if not for the Great Recession. But there you have it, the recession came, and these jobs were the first to go.

According to Bureau of Labor Statistics and United States Department of Labor data, approximately 1.7 million people working in clerical and administrative positions when the recession began were not working in that profession by the end of 2009. Similarly, there are close to 50 percent fewer printing operators and 40 percent fewer travel agents over the same two-year period. The list goes on: 7.5 percent of retail jobs were eliminated, 16 percent of manufacturing jobs were eliminated and 14 percent of public relations and advertising jobs were eliminated.

The National Skills Coalition estimates that 75 percent of the increase in total unemployment between May 2008 and May 2009 was attributable to permanent job losses rather than to temporary layoffs. The permanent loss of jobs is one reason that economists predict that it will take over five years to replace the millions of jobs lost during the recession.

The key word is "replace." The jobs that were lost are gone, and the skills needed to do those jobs are not in demand.

This is not your father's recession — the new jobs will not be the old jobs.

Traditional jobs are disappearing. Twenty-first century jobs require an ever-rising threshold of skills, and the skills they require change frequently. To remain competitive in the marketplace requires that workers learn new skills in order to avail themselves of new opportunities in order to meet new labor market demands.

The workplace is changing.

Today's workplace is highly competitive, highly technological and rapidly changing. What you learned in high school and college no longer equips you for a lifetime of work.

Job tenures are shorter. The concept of the "career job" is going the way of the three-martini lunch as workers are now experiencing more frequent job changes for reasons related to the economy or simply to find a higher paying position in the same, similar or different field.

So what can a worker do to help ensure that their skill set is current thereby reducing the risk of becoming redundant?

The short answer — become a lifelong learner.

Lifelong learning is a term coined more than 35 years ago by Edgar Faure in his UNESCO report Learning To Be. In his report, Faure used the concepts of "lifelong education" and "the learning society" as the cornerstone of what he hoped would be an international education policy. But that's a story for another day.

Today, lifelong learning has a variety of definitions depending on who is using the term and for what purpose. For me, the definition used by the European Society of Association Executives works best. They contend that lifelong learning is "all learning activity undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective."

It works for me.

Regardless, use whatever definition you're comfortable with, but at its essence, lifelong learning is about being self-directed and initiating your own learning. It's not about waiting for your employer to suggest, or worse mandate, training.

Lifelong learning means becoming a work-in-progress. It means demonstrating that you understand the importance of acquiring new skills and that you take personal responsibility for having them.

Lifelong learning is an important element of designing a successful career. America's Career Resource Network, National Career Development Guidelines identify three elements that characterize lifelong learning strategies for success. They are:

Technology skills: Remaining current on the latest trends and technological advances within a career field; Employment skills: Remaining current on the latest movements and advancements in job skills and; Workplace learning: Completing all opportunities to learn new job skills through on-the-job training.

If our goal is a truly competitive workforce, workers have to have the knowledge and behaviors to adapt to ever changing labor market requirements. Competitive workers stay current, look ahead and have the desire and ability to continue learning in formal and informal ways throughout their lives.

In other words, a competitive workforce is comprised of lifelong learners.

The risk associated with not being a lifelong learner is high — obsolescence.

Paul Grasso is the executive director of the North Country Workforce Investment Board, the county's designated workforce development planning agency, and the North Country Workforce Partnership Inc. He has more than 20 years experience developing workforce programs in both the United States and Europe.