

How can people still work like this?

The other day, in the process of hiring a new person for a bookkeeping position, we were looking over a number of résumés from applicants. It came out that one of the people applying for the job had recently left a position where all the bookkeeping was still done manually. It was a small company, but not that small. They were big enough to require a bookkeeper. Our controller mentioned that she knew an accountant, aged 45, who stubbornly refused to get a computer. He still did all his work manually. I was floored by this. I just could not imagine the labor component of doing accounting this way.

Where Are All The Jobs?

This month we were treated to the various

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political parties expounding their solutions for getting the economy back on its feet and people off the unemployment roll. Each party presented some kind of plan to get people back to work, usually constrained by their other big concern, which is to do something about cutting the massive government spending deficit. No longer are the parties easily discernible along a traditional left-right spectrum. The traditional right-wing Conservatives are as likely to get involved in job cre-



From the Editor

ation as the supposedly left-wing NDP. The NDP, when they finally do get into power, is responsible for making massive cuts to the public sector.

The question about any of these plans often falls into the realm of time frame. The five years that most governments are allowed in power is rarely enough time to implement properly and then monitor the success of whatever the party's approach is. Will we really know whether NAFTA is a good idea until 25 years down the line? Is the current monetary approach good or bad? Can any Western government really effectively create new jobs in a slow world economy? How can Canada have full employment (according to *Maclean's* magazine there are 1.6 million unemployed, a rate of 10 percent) if her trade partners continue to languish in recessions of their own?

Even with its massive spending and debt, the government is only a very small part of the overall economy, which is on the order of \$700 billion this year. With its hands tied behind its back because of the deficit, it is becoming more evident that the new jobs are going to have to come from the private sector.

Computers A Net Zero To Productivity?

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answer, I believe, is *technology*. For years, the surveys have been saying that computers are a net zero to productivity. The claim was that because of their complexity, maintenance and training requirements, they did not really add much to productivity. What they did add was often erased by people getting lost in the details. Who doesn't know someone who was given a computer, who then proceeded to spend hours creating a chart or graphic which would have never been attempted before the computer came along and even when produced, added little to the profitability of the company?

Not All Smoke And Mirrors

While this scenario may have been true for a time, what the computer industry has to offer has gone from smoke and mirrors to hard-edged solutions. Computer networks with electronic mail *do* flatten the hierarchy of corporations, eliminating a whole layer of middle managers. Windows and Macintosh graphical user interfaces *do* shorten the learning curve on training — less training, less demand for trainers. Optical Character Recognition software and scanners *do* allow companies to lay off typists. Voice mail systems *do* mean fewer jobs for receptionists. The list goes on. Computers and technology *do* increase productivity.

Smash The Computers?

Even if we as Canadians could smash all these computers, becoming modern-day Luddites, it would not stop the rush of international competitors who are willing to use technology to compete. The rise of international telecommunications networks such as the Internet means that software is being devel-

oped in India or the former Soviet Union where an entire team of programmers can be hired for a fraction of the cost of a good Canadian programmer. Global satellite communications means that Canadian consumers are being called by telemarketers with charming English accents from British Guyana who get paid \$2 an hour. The efficiency of the worldwide distribution system created by computers, telecommunications and airplanes means that many companies are relocating manufacturing plants in Mexico, Thailand and India — anywhere they can achieve a significant wage differential for an educated and efficient work force. The worldwide trends are unstoppable.

So What Do We Do?

You think I have an answer when all those politicians can't come up with one? Be serious. Some generalized notions to keep you going, though. Hang in there. Get educated, keep learning new and valuable skills. Be entrepreneurial (even if you work for someone else) and watch for opportunities. There are no safe jobs, but there are some big trends and opportunities. Even if you have a job now, look for ways to make yourself invaluable to your company. Or, in the event that your company goes bankrupt, make sure that your skill set will be so desirable that someone else will want to hire you. Try to use computers and technology to your own advantage. Keep moving. Keep learning. Stay alert to changes that will affect you.

Enjoy the issue,

Douglas Alder
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