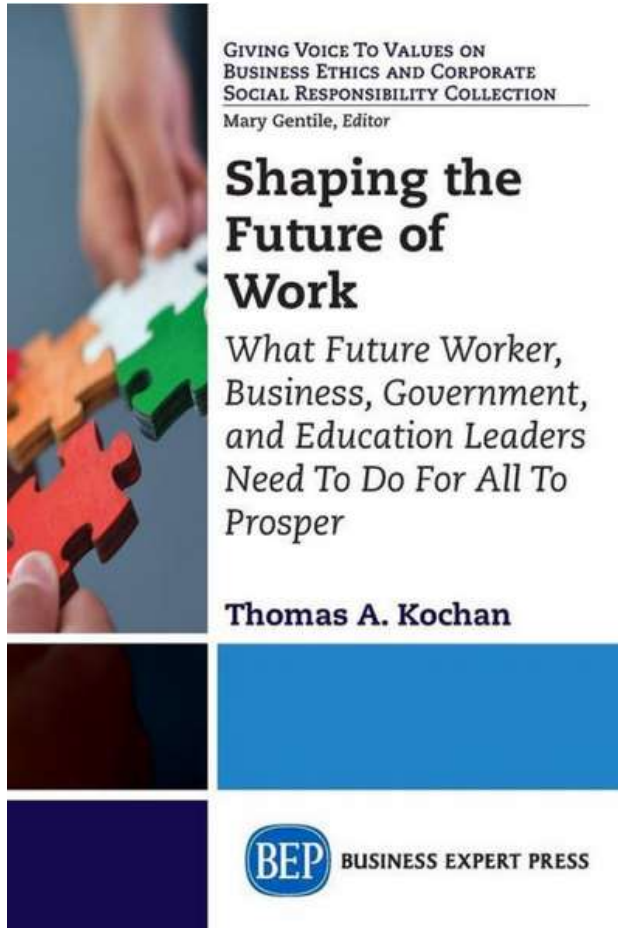


# TIMES CHANGE

## 'Future of Work' calls for course corrections

Posted: Sunday, May 15, 2016

*"Shaping the Future of Work: What Future Worker, Business, Government and Education Leaders Need to Do for All to Prosper"* by Thomas A. Kochan. New York: Business Expert Press, 2016, 184 pages, \$59.95 (hardbound).



“Work hard in school, get as much education as you can, play by the rules, and you will do well in life. That was the advice I got from my parents, and it clearly served me, and the majority of my baby boomer cohort quite well,” Thomas A. Kochan explains near the beginning of “Shaping the Future of Work: What Future Worker, Business, Government and Education Leaders Need to Do for All to Prosper,” his treatise on the evolving nature of employment and what will have to change for ensuing generations to achieve a viable quality of life. “We were fortunate to graduate from high school, vocational school programs, or college into an economy that was growing, pushing new technological frontiers and providing ample opportunities to pursue our interests. We were able to live the American Dream.”

“Shaping the Future of Work” is the latest addition to the “Giving Voice to Values on Business Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility Collection,” which is edited for Business Expert Press by Mary Gentile. Consisting of a prologue and six moderately succinct chapters, the volume is more ardent call to action

than in-depth analysis. Among the features of Kochan’s prose I found particularly appealing is his unapologetic and unabashed bias for action. He certainly does an exemplary job of establishing the historical context for the circumstances that precipitated the current economic landscape. What really sets this contribution apart from many of his contemporaries, however, is how the various strategies he lays out for moving forward are integrated into a comprehensive, overarching game plan.

In addition to being an accomplished scholar, Kochan is a masterful storyteller, which makes the book more accessible to a general audience. Whereas some academics seem adept at transforming the relatively straightforward into something seemingly beyond the grasp of those without advanced educational credentials, Kochan has a gift for taking the opposite approach. By including several carefully placed case studies and instructive vignettes at critical points throughout the narrative, he

makes the complex seem surprisingly lucid – yet he never strays too far from the practical implications at the heart of his central thesis.

Kochan is the George M. Bunker Professor of Work and Employment Relations at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management, where he also serves as co-director of the MIT Institute for Work and Employment Research. A past president of the International Industrial Relations Association, his previous books include "Working in America: Labor Market Institutions for the New Century," which he co-wrote with Paul Osterman, Richard Locke and Michael Piore, and "Restoring the American Dream: A Working Families' Agenda for America."

Although I found the entire book captivating and oddly inspiring – unusual for a manuscript of this genre – two chapters really stood out as being exceptionally well-crafted and worthy of reflection on multiple levels. In "What Changed in the 1980s and After?" Kochan educated readers about the tectonic shift that took place during a decade that saw technological innovations evolve at an unprecedented and ever-accelerating pace.

"There is no specific marker for when the so-called knowledge-based economy took over from the industrial economy, but the 1980s would be as good a marker as any other," he argues. "The early high-tech firms were all in rapid growth mode and were competing for newly-minted graduates with computer programming and related skills. Manufacturing industries were restructuring operations to drive productivity and improve product quality, and this too required workers who were able to provide ideas for continuous improvement, perform basic statistical charting and analysis, work effectively and solve problems in teams, and in some cases program computer-drive machine and/or design tools."

As anyone who lived through this game-changing era can attest, the times were indeed a changing. And it was during the late 1980s that colleges and universities were asked to play a much larger role in keeping the workforce competitive. We were rapidly entering the age of globalization, which was driven in its early years by an unprecedented Japanese economic engine. The lessons taught by American management and quality control consultants immediately after World War II obviously served our former enemy well.

The other chapter that caught my attention was "A Call to Action: Building the Next-Generation Social Contract." In this final section of the book, Kochan provides his vision for the future, together with a detailed plan outlining what each segment of the population (business and government leaders, educators, the next generation workforce and workforce organizations) needs to do in order to ensure everyone is able to thrive as the 21st century gains more traction. Naturally, I honed in on the role of my particular profession: "Educators have two primary goals and responsibilities: to teach students to be literate and informed citizens and to ensure that the workforce of the future has the knowledge, skills and abilities to compete in a global, knowledge-based economy," Kochan writes. "Given the importance of education and skill to an economy based on knowledge and innovation, educators of all sorts and levels, from those who teach in preschools to those who teach in lifelong-learning programs, need to be active contributors to the next-generation social contract."

The picture Kochan paints is both optimistic as well as a little disconcerting. He believes we can forge an economic system capable of providing most of the world's inhabitants with gainful employment – but it will require a course correction or two as well as an intentional realignment of our institutions so they better meet societal needs. But as they often say at the gym, no pain, no gain. I think this is an important book; I recommend it highly.

*Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*