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Opinion: Workforce training can't solve middle class jobs crisis



Training people for middle class jobs won't help if there aren't enough jobs for them. (LiPo Ching/Bay Area News Group)

By **JEFFREY BUCHANAN** |

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Since the passage of NAFTA, workforce development and job training programs have been enthusiastically championed as the solution to job losses associated with global trade deals. The results of that viewpoint are now in.

Tens of millions of Americans believe themselves abandoned by the economy. Donald Trump is president, and there may not be another trade agreement for decades.

Regrettably, the same overconfidence in job training is now being proposed as a solution to job losses associated with technological innovation. P.K. Agarwal makes this argument in his column on the effects of driverless cars on workers' careers (The Mercury News, 2/28/17).

The problem in both cases is not that workforce development programs are wrong or valueless. It is that they are being asked to respond to a problem they cannot solve.

By training workers, we can prepare people for existing or new jobs that can't be filled because of a lack of skilled personnel. In rare cases, training programs may even induce the creation of jobs when a business is dubious about expanding but the presence of skilled personnel impacts the decision to go forward.

Participating in a job training program may also be excellent advice for an individual. Newly skilled workers can better compete for a limited number of decent paying occupations. But more people with more skills competing for too few jobs doesn't solve America's employment problem.

America needs a massive increase in middle class jobs. Our core problem is a quality jobs shortage, not a job skills shortage.

Training cannot repair our hourglass economy that generates many high paying jobs at the top, a shrunken middle class and a massive group of low wage, no benefit, dead end jobs at the bottom.

In Silicon Valley today, five of the top ten occupations pay less than \$18 per hour, well below a basic living wage. Five pay above \$40/hour and require advanced education. In the middle we find: nothing.

Automation could kill even more of these middle wage jobs, including one of our nation's largest occupations, commercial truck driving, and leave fewer paths to the middle class in much of the country.

Continuing down this path will squeeze the middle tighter still. State economic projections for the 9-county Bay Area predict just 30,900 middle-wage job openings per year. Today the Bay Area hosts more than 1.1 million low-wage jobs.

What happens if you train 1.1 million people to chase after 30,900 jobs? You wind up with over a million badly disappointed workers.

What's more, you probably bring down wages for the 30,900 good jobs because of the oversupply of qualified applicants.

Innovation has long been the engine of economic vitality and job creation in Silicon Valley. But innovation that helps people to live better, healthier, longer, more fulfilling lives is in danger of being eclipsed by "innovative" new strategies to drive down workers' pay and eliminate the very idea of full-time work.

Uber's CEO Travis Kalanick was recently caught on video berating an Uber driver for daring to speak up about constant pay cuts and broken promises to workers. After Kalanick's tirade, the driver responded, "Good luck to you, but I know [you're not] going to go far."

If industry leaders continue to innovate millions of people out of employment and offer them nothing but training for jobs that don't exist, then Silicon Valley may not be destined to go far.

The hourglass economy has produced a political hourglass, and the sands of time are racing through it. Our best minds need to focus on job creation – on quality job creation – and they need to do so now.

Jeffrey Buchanan is the Director of Public Policy at Working Partnerships USA. He wrote this for The Mercury News.

Will better workforce training create middle class jobs?

- No, training won't help if too few jobs are available
- Yes, a trained workforce will attract good-paying companies
- Not sure

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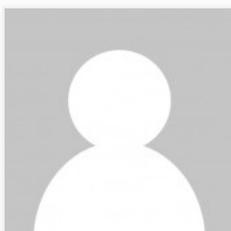
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