PREPARING STUDENTS FOR A NEW WORLD OF WORK IN THE 21ST CENTURY

A Series for K-12 Educational Administrators to Use with their Teams and Stakeholders

By Will Richardson and Rob Mancabelli
This three-part series by Will Richardson and Rob Mancabelli is written for school administrators to drive meaningful conversations about schools in the 21st century with building-level and district-level teams, boards of education, parents and other community members. It’s intended to be a thought-provoking, resource-filled starting point for discussing the evolving world of work in the 21st century and how our schools need to evolve to prepare students for these new realities.

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A QUICK QUIZ
Before we start, here’s a quick quiz to see where you’re at in your understanding of the world of work in 2020:

1. **Short Answer:** By 2020, what percentage of workers will be self-employed?

2. **True/False:** The majority of your students in 2020 will still land jobs with benefits like healthcare, life insurance, and pensions.

3. **Essay:** Explain the impact of various software and robotic technologies on the job pool over the next seven years.

4. **Multiple Choice:** The average commuting time for a majority of our students a decade from now will be (a) More than 15 miles (b) Between 1 and 15 miles (c) Less than 50 feet.

5. **Essay:** Explain the importance of a resume (digital or analog) to getting hired for a job in the future.

Read on to see how you did.
Here’s the one thing we can safely predict about the future world of work for the students currently in our classrooms—it will look very little like the world of work we’re preparing them for today.

In short, that’s because schools were not constructed to meet the realities of today’s modern learners and workers. Schools were built for a time when access to knowledge, information and teachers was scarce, restricted to what we could find in our local libraries and communities. But with the advent of the Web and our growing abundant access to all of those things, the form and function of schools is now in question as the needs of our students begin to shift in some dramatic, important ways.

To be blunt, a 20th century education no longer cuts it in a world where rapid automation shifts the types of skills that are valued in the workforce each year and where the ability to work virtually means we’re competing with passionate, highly-skilled, very motivated people from around the world. As our workplaces evolve, our approach to preparing our students for the 21st century must change as well, and a deep understanding of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead is the only way to make that happen.

And one last point—we know that education is not simply about job readiness. The purpose of this series is not to argue that changes in the world of work are the only reason that schools should change. In fact, we’ve co-authored an entire book, Personal Learning Networks, that makes an argument for many of these changes purely from the standpoint of the evolution of learning. However, each year administrators besiege
us with the question, “How can I start a discussion about these shifts?”

We think that “work” is an ideal place to start. No question, the key driver to the major shifts in the workplace in general is the explosion of the Internet, specifically the Web. Two and one-half billion people have become connected online in just under two decades, a number that is expected to double in the next five years.

While the social and educational aspects of these connections are important, the ability to collaborate with others and easily share professional expertise online is turning thinking about traditional employment on its head. Suddenly, competition for individual jobs has gone global; “one in a million” now only gets an applicant through the first round of interviews.

Below are five of the most important new realities stemming from this change.

REALITY #1: THE RISE OF SELF-EMPLOYMENT
With a growing number of skilled professionals shopping their wares online (many of them from disadvantaged, highly motivated markets), businesses now have access to an enormous pool of contractors and freelancers vying for jobs large and small. In the U.S. alone, one survey$¹$ suggests that by the end of this decade, over half of workers will be self-employed. And most of those will find (and be found by) their clients via “the cloud.”$²$

This means that the most successful workers in the future will be those who are used to thinking and acting entrepreneurially. Princeton University professor Anne-Marie Slaughter suggests that a winning strategy for the future of work$³$ is to be able to “design your own profession and convince employers that you are exactly what they need.” Or, as The New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman’s recent column declared, “Need a job? Invent it.”$⁴$

REALITY #2: RAPID JOB-SWITCHING
Additionally, traditional expectations of long-term, full-time employment complete with healthcare, life insurance and pension are quickly being rewritten.

To be clear—we’re not saying the 40-year job is gone; we’re saying the 4-year job is. In fact, according to the most recent available data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average
U.S. worker in 2013 now stays at a job for 4.4 years, but this current generation of employees, often known as the Millennial generation (born between 1977-1997), expects to stay at their jobs even less time than that—only three years, according to the Future Workplace “Multiple Generations @ Work” survey.

This means that the average worker will have potentially 15 to 20 jobs over the course of his or her lifetime.

REALITY #3: THE RISE OF THE ROBOTS

Another impact on the future of work is that technology is rapidly shifting and, in some cases, replacing many blue and, increasingly, white collar jobs. For example, according to the Financial Times, in just the last six years, the U.S. has lost almost 2 million clerical jobs, many at the expense of computer automation. That trend is quickly expanding into other areas. As The New York Times reported last summer, the future holds a fast ramp up of robots that are “far more adept than those now commonly used by automakers and other heavy manufacturers.” These robots will continue to take the place of hundreds of thousands of skilled workers and positions which, in many cases, required a college degree.

While these jobs are eliminated, others are replacing them, mostly in fields like technology, medicine and design. This rapid shift has caused the Bureau of Labor Statistics to predict a worker shortage in 2018 because people will not have learned the skills that are in the highest demand. When interviewed, Andrew McAfee, a researcher from MIT who studies the ways that information technology (IT) affects business, commented that he would teach kids “Things that computers don’t appear to be very good at.”

This shift is summed up by Marc Andreessen, the inventor of Netscape (the first popular Internet browser): “The spread of computers and the Internet will put jobs in two categories: People who tell computers what to do and people who are told by computers what to do.”

REALITY #4: WORK GOES MOBILE

Regardless of the kind of work that our students will be doing, technology will play an integral role in most every aspect. Increasingly, work will be mobile, with more and more workers working from home or wherever they may find themselves with an...
Internet connection. New “cloud based” technologies like Google Docs, Dropbox and Slideshare, and real-time video conferencing tools like Google Hangouts and Skype are just the first set of tools to support collaboration and sharing in the virtual workplace. New synchronous and asynchronous tools are being developed every week.

And interestingly, more and more, our students will connect and do work through the personal devices that they own.

REALITY #5: THE EMPLOYEE AS BRAND

Finally, the way that our students find work will change as well. For many, jobs will come not through answering an ad but through being found online by companies looking for specific skills. According to Canada’s The Globe and Mail, potential employers are more and more moving toward Web searches and the digital portfolios11 that individuals are creating on sites like LinkedIn. As one recruiter noted, candidates have to be participating in online social media sites in order to get a leg up. “You might miss out on an awesome job because people won’t find you,” she said.

And as The Wall Street Journal notes12, increasingly Twitter is becoming a “new job board” and the new resume. All in all, the content that our students create and share online is becoming the new CV, not quite the way we thought of attracting employers in the past.

PART II

Preparing for this transformation in the world of work will require a different set of skills. Part two of this series will describe the shift in the types of skills required to land (and keep) a job in the 21st century, laying the groundwork for Part III of the series, which describes how schools can deliver those skills.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Will Richardson
A parent of two teen-agers, Will Richardson has spent the last dozen years developing an international reputation as a leading thinker, speaker, and writer about the intersection of social online learning networks and education. His latest book, *Why School? How Education Must Change When Learning and Information are Everywhere*, is the top selling TED book ever, and is based on his 2012 TEDx Talk in Melbourne, AU. He is the CLO of Modern Learner Media, a company dedicated to changing the global conversation around education reform.

@WillRich45

Rob Mancabelli
Rob is a mission-driven educator, fascinating speaker, and inspiring author on educational innovation. He's the co-author of the award-winning book *Personal Learning Networks* (2011) and he writes for leading education magazines. Rob is the Founder and CEO of BrightBytes, an education technology company that improves the way millions of students learn through the use of data.

@RobMancabelli

CONTACT BRIGHTBYTES

To learn more about how BrightBytes is driving student achievement by effectively measuring the impact of technology on learning, please contact us:

490 2nd Street Suite 302
San Francisco, CA 94107
1.877.433.4036
Info@BrightBytes.net
www.BrightBytes.net
@BrightBytes
RESOURCES


   http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/12/design_your_own_profession.html

   http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/31/opinion/sunday/friedman-need-a-job-invent-it.html?hp&_r=3&

   http://www.fastcompany.com/1802731/four-year-career


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