

Workforce Challenges and Generational Connections

Over the next 20 years, the largest and most highly educated cohort of workers will retire from the California workforce and need to be replaced. This will happen even with baby boomers working longer and retiring later. At the same time, the economy is projected to add nearly 4 million jobs as the state regains the jobs lost in the recession and continues to add jobs.

Replacing retiring baby boomers and preparing for future job growth means we will need new workers at all skill levels. For every high-tech worker or teacher who retires, there is also a plumber, firefighter, truck driver and mechanic who will need to be replaced. These opportunities provide hope to families worried about their future and the future of their children. But the opportunities must be converted to success if our economy and residents are to prosper.

There can be abundant opportunity for Californians, but it comes with a very big IF — whether California and the nation can develop a growing, skilled workforce for our 21st century economy.

Our future labor force will come from three sources: current and future students (California's youth), new immigrants and our existing workforce. As a result, success for California and Californians requires a three-pronged strategy: 1) better K-12 education and access to college for our children, 2) a welcoming national immigration policy and 3) programs to help existing workers add skills and be a source of replacement for retiring baby boomers.

But achieving broad prosperity will also require a second, more subtle shift to emerge — a growing recognition that the fates of old and young Californians are linked.

The next generation needs aging baby boomers to support funding not only for K-12 and higher education, but also for the infrastructure necessary to maintain a competitive economy. At the same time, the older generation needs younger Californians to succeed so they can buy their homes and support public services, including sustainable Medicare and Social Security programs.

So what needs to happen?

The first challenge is to prepare students for tomorrow's economy. Raising high school graduation rates is a must. Then we must reverse the decline in enrollment and class offerings at our public colleges. The tsunami of baby boomer retirements means that we need all our students prepared for success and excited by the opportunities for their lives.

The next challenge is immigration reform. Currently about 200,000 immigrants come to live and work in California each year. Immigrants provide needed skills, start businesses and buy homes in California. Baby boomer retirements and job growth will increase the need for immigrants with skills and capital.

California has always been a welcoming state for people regardless of their religious affiliations or sexual orientation and regardless of where they were born. Californians can be an active voice for federal immigration policies that respond to our workforce needs while strengthening the welcome mat for talented workers and entrepreneurs.

The third leg of our effort must be to help existing workers find opportunities to improve their skills. The skill requirements for workforce success are constantly changing and increasing. For existing workers, the retirement of so many baby boomers, combined with job growth, will provide the opportunity to move up to a better job if they can acquire the right skills.

Two parts of the answer are clear: The first is to engage businesses to tell us what they need, help excite students about the connection between learning and earning and provide training and internships as well as information. The second is to strengthen community colleges, which provide a critical contribution to education and training in California.

None of this will happen unless older Californians, who play a critical role in voting and decision making, find their connection to the success of youth, immigrants and existing workers in preparing for a prosperous California — one in which the challenge of replacing retiring baby boomers and filling new jobs is met by an equal tsunami of new talent in our state.

This essay was prepared for The James Irvine Foundation 75th anniversary collection of blog essays, all of which appear on the Foundation's website <http://www.irvine.org/news-insights/categories/listings/irvine-at-75>.



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