

Essay #3: Before Acting Get the Facts

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“Band-aid” approaches are the typical response to request for food, clothing, and other forms for assistance. As “stop gap” measures, they are necessary. However, if we seek to permanently lessen the demand for assistance, a comprehensive set of short and long-term strategies is required.

To build such a set of strategies we need a picture of what our future world will look. Given the uncertainty surrounding the war on terrorism, we might be hesitant to make a prediction. Yet, there are several trends that will occur no matter what path the Administration takes. This essay provides that forecast.

Over the next 40 years, the nation will continue to experience four major changes: the retirement of baby boomers, growing racial and ethnic diversity, continued technological change and globalization. The Williamsburg area will be at the center of these changes.

The Aging Population

In 1990, 12% of Williamsburg-James City County’s population was 65 years and older. In 2000, the figure jumped to 16%, making this segment the fastest growing group. Over this same period the portion of York’s 65 and over population increased from 7% to 9%. During the next decade, this growth will accelerate.

Growing Racial and Ethnic Diversity

By 2050, the U.S. population is expected to increase by 50 percent, from about 281 million to an estimated 394 million. Immigration will play a key role in this growth, accounting for almost two-thirds of the total. A defining feature of this growth will be

how it makes the U.S. more racially and ethnically diverse. Hispanics are the area's fastest growing segment of the population. We are beginning to see this growth across the community, particularly in our schools.

Technological Change

The use of computers and the Internet will become more pervasive and the functions performed using computers will dramatically increase. The influence of technology will go beyond new equipment and faster communications, as work and skills will be redefined and reorganized. Many residents that commute to Norfolk, Richmond and Washington, DC already rely heavily on these technologies. As commute times increase the reliance on technology will grow. Further, individuals who are educated and trained to be independent thinkers and possess IT skills reap the greatest rewards. Those rewards will continue as long as they are lifelong learners.

Globalization

Global competition will continue to affect the type of work being done in American workplaces, creating new high-skilled jobs and lessening demand for low-skilled work. Its impact on all Americans will continue to grow as more of the economy is involved in producing exports or competing with imports. Locally, our connectedness to the rest of the world has grown with the creation of the Wall-Mart distribution center and the use of foreign labor in our tourism sector. It will continue to grow as our technology sector expands.

These trends are changing where we work, how we work, when we work and with whom we work. They have created four national and local challenges:

- Providing a secure retirement,

- Creating a skilled workforce,
- Balancing work and family obligations, and
- Managing racial and ethnic diversity.

These trends have created several local challenges:

- Understanding the economic relationships between Williamsburg, James City and York Counties,

- Growing the economy, while simultaneously diversifying the job base and preserving the environment,

- Meeting the labor force needs of a rapidly aging population, and
- Expanding activities that raise the expectations of all children.

Next week's essay will discuss strategies to meet these challenges.

Technology is Redefining and Reorganizing How We Work, Where We Work, When We Work, and With Whom We Work

Element	Old System	New System
Workplace organization	Hierarchical & Rigid	Flat & Flexible Networks of teams
Job design	Narrow Repetitive/Standardized	Broad Multiple responsibilities
Employee skills	Specialized	Multi/cross-skilled
Workforce Management	Command/control systems	Self-management
Communications	Top down Need to know	Widely diffused Big Picture
Decision-Making Responsibility	Chain of command	Decentralized
Direction	Standard operating procedures	Procedures under constant change
Worker Autonomy	Low	High
Employee knowledge of organization	Narrow	Broad

Source: Adapted from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Office of Technology Policy, Briefing for Secretary Ronald H. Brown for the Conference on the American Workplace, 1993.

