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Workers In The State Can look To Darwin For Answer

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Wages are barely growing despite higher productivity; high-wage manufacturing jobs are being replaced by lower-wage service jobs; factories that stay open do so through new technologies, automated assembly lines, union concessions, and the constant outsourcing of components; skills that were relevant just five years ago are now becoming obsolete; and the buying power of paychecks is being eroded by inflation and high energy prices.

Eastern Connecticut's workers are in a bind and Charles Darwin has the answer.

A crisis sometimes helps

Sometimes it takes a crisis to provoke action. Even though eastern Connecticut isn't necessarily in a crisis; it's time that we take action to ensure our economy doesn't continue its trend towards lower-skilled service jobs. Already, it's getting hard for local employers to fill jobs that demand a higher level of skills. If this continues, they'll stop looking and move elsewhere. It's time to build up eastern Connecticut's knowledge economy. And our best bet is to do it one worker at a time: an "organic growth" strategy, if you will.

Everyone likes the idea of a knowledge-based economy, and we certainly want the prosperity and growth that is supposed to come with it; but it requires change and people don't really want to change. It's much easier just to keep everything exactly the way it always has been. But eastern Connecticut's workers can no longer stand still and expect different jobs — different from those being offered today — to materialize. To paraphrase Charles Darwin: It is not the strongest worker that will succeed. It is not the most intelligent worker that will succeed. It is the worker who is most adaptable to change that will succeed.

So how do workers adapt? Basically, they learn new things. It doesn't have to be formal: you can read a book or learn a new computer program; and it doesn't have to be expensive. For example, the University of New Haven's southeastern campus regularly offers free seminars at Mitchell College in New London. (To learn more about these seminars contact the school at SECampus@newhaven.edu.) It's very easy though to find reasons for not continuing to learn or for not furthering one's education. But the old reasons are getting weaker, thanks to technology. Technology is erasing the traditional barriers of time, distance, and access. Using technology, you can download entire books and magazines onto your MP3 players and then listen to them in your car on your way to work.

Today's technology allows incredible and unprecedented access to education; we can take courses and even earn entire degrees online. For example, Eastern Connecticut State University's School of Continuing Education offers both credit and non-credit courses online (<http://www.easternct.edu/ce/>). Through a partnering effort with our region's employers and our two community colleges, Quinebaug Valley Community College and Three Rivers Community College, the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board (EWIB) is making technology and online courses a major focus of its investment strategy.

These courses range from computer technology to finance to team building. You can learn more about these course offerings through the EWIB's Business Services Team by contacting the representative nearest you: Joe Mack (jmack.ctwbs@ct.gov) in Danielson; Kathleen Chartier (kchartier.ctwbs@ct.gov) in the Willimantic area; Mark Fillmore (mark.fillmore@ct.gov) for Norwich; or in New London, Shanetta Knight (Shanetta.knight@ct.gov).

Unfortunately, too many people buy into the notion that learning is done after graduation. Richard Brodhead, president of Duke University, says that people mistakenly think of education "like it's a vaccine or something that you might have it early in life that then lasts you the rest of your time." While this may have been true during the time of lifetime employment at a single company, it is definitely no longer the case. Lifetime employment needs to be replaced by lifelong learning.

General Eric K. Shinseki, retired Chief of Staff U.S. Army, once said, "If you don't like change, you're going to like irrelevance

even less." Now is a great time to take that first step toward staying relevant. Without learning, there will be no change. And without change, high skill jobs in eastern Connecticut will become as extinct as well...high skill jobs.

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