

A source of creative energy we're fools not to tap

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Globe and Mail Update
November 24, 2007 at 12:03 AM EDT

My father, the son of Italian immigrants, never made it to high school, instead taking a job in a factory at the age of 13 to help support his family. He rose to supervisor, and on the few times he took me as a young boy to see his place of work, on Saturdays when the factory was running overtime, I would be captivated by the humming machinery. He would see my wide stare and say, "Richard, it's not the machines and technology that make this factory great. It all depends on the knowledge, intelligence and creativity of the people who work here."

I recalled those Saturdays recently when I had my hair cut in Toronto. It turned out that the hairdresser, a stylish young man in his late 20s or early 30s, was once a resident of Birmingham, an upscale suburb of Detroit that I knew well because my wife lived there when we met.

Without thinking, I said, "My wife used to get her hair done in Birmingham; what salon did you work in?"

"I wasn't a hairstylist then, man. I worked for General Motors," he said "Really?" I said, trying to dig myself out of a hole. "What plant did you work at?"

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"Plant?" came his reply. "I didn't work in a factory — I'm a mechanical engineer and I worked on new product development."



My jaw dropped. This man had quit a high-paying job in a good company so he could cut people's hair. He had left the creative class because it wasn't creative enough for him and had gone into a service industry to express his creativity.

The point of retelling this story is not that his current line of work is better than his old one; it's that we need to expand our view of what good jobs can be and how to create them.

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In North America, people who are employed in fields considered part of the creative class — science, technology, arts, culture, entertainment and professions — account for 35 to 40 per cent of the work force and produce more than half of all wages and salaries. But here's the rub: It's not enough to try to boost this creative economy just by increasing the pool of engineers and scientists, filmmakers, entertainers, media types, financial professionals and scientists.

The most overlooked — but most important — element of my theory and of the creative economy itself is that every human being is creative.

One of the great fallacies of modern times is the idea that creativity is limited to a small group. Most people, the belief goes, don't want to be creative, couldn't do it if asked and would be uncomfortable in an environment where creativity was expected of them.

This is false. Creativity is a virtually limitless resource that defies social status. I saw this in the 1980s in my studies of high-performance Japanese manufacturers such as Toyota and Honda.

Years ago, Konosuke Matsushita, founder of the great electronics company, laid down the real competitive challenge facing the world. Western factories had started out with better technology, better-trained engineers and managers and more aggressive chief executives. The key to Japan's success, he said, lay in mobilizing the knowledge and intelligence of its factory workers. The rest is history.

Yet our society continues to encourage the creative talents of a privileged minority. We systematically neglect the creative potential of the 60 to 70 per cent of the population that lies outside a narrow view of the creative class. There are fewer and fewer rewarding jobs for people without college degrees. This amounts to a huge inefficiency in our system for harnessing creative energy and turning it into wealth and productivity capacity.

The great challenge of society is to tap the creativity of much larger segments of the work force. It's here that openness, diversity and self-expression play their greatest role. For creativity is the great leveller —

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it defies gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and outward appearance. We cannot know in advance where the next Steve Jobs, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Balsillie or Leslie Feist will come from.

That is why the cities and countries that are the most diverse and open have the greatest economic advantage — they can mobilize a greater range of creative talent. As U.S. economist Scott E. Page has written, cultural diversity is associated with cognitive diversity — different ways and approaches to solving problems — which is critical to innovation and economic growth and development.

Imagine the advantages that would go to the city or country that could tap into that resource. It could do for a city such as Toronto what Toyota did for manufacturing, bringing the creative talents of many more people into the equation. The key to creating real, enduring economic prosperity is to extend the boundaries of the creative economy to blue-collar workers, service workers and even those who work in agriculture.

Already, we can see how retailers and service companies such as H&M, Whole Foods and Starbucks have used creativity and innovation to transform their industries. Imagine what will happen if an entire city, region or country could do the same.

Sooner or later, somewhere in the world will make this happen. My guess is that Scandinavia's big cities — Stockholm, Copenhagen, Helsinki and others — and especially Canada's great cities, like Toronto, with their legacy of openness and social partnership, have the leg up here.

On those Saturdays after we had visited the factory, my father would drive home past a women's hair salon, or what we back then called a beauty parlour. He would stop and say, "Richard, look at that place. I could have owned it. That could have been mine."

He would go on to explain how his two older sisters had owned and run the shop. But when his sister Mary moved to California with her husband and family, they had to give it up. My father was a creative person, a talented amateur artist who had a knack for cutting hair and

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frequently cut mine and my brother's. He even helped my mom colour and set hers. His sisters wanted to turn the business over to him and he, deep down, wanted to run it. But he couldn't accept their offer.

"Richard," he would say, "I was dumb. It was the stupidest thing I ever did. I would have loved to own that place and do that work. But I couldn't take it on. How would it look for a man of my generation to give up work in a factory to be a ladies' hairdresser?"

I remember my father after retiring from the factory, when he had taken a part-time job in health spa gym. I had never seen him so happy, working with people and finally having an outlet for his true creativity.

Richard Florida teaches at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management and is academic director of its Martin Prosperity Institute. He also founded The Creative Class Group, a consulting firm (creativeclass.com) in Washington, D.C., and wrote the bestselling books The Rise of the Creative Class and The Flight of the Creative Class. His column will appear monthly in Focus.