



The Rise of the Creative Service Worker

Jason Gots on August 10, 2012, 12:00 AM

Power and Influence

What's the Big Idea?

Gone, more or less, are the days of the secure, blue-collar factory job in the United States. These days, America manufactures ideas and services, the latter being ideas in physical form. Take Fab.com, for example, a website and newsletter that sells haute design at (more or less) affordable prices. They're essentially curators and distributors with a social-media twist – you can see what other users have purchased and share your faves on Facebook.

Fab launched a year ago and has grown to over 3 million members. It sells over 100k products a month, made mostly by small design studios. The core of its business is its concept, realized by a small design team and improved daily through careful analysis of user data. But as Fab grows exponentially, it's facing serious delivery-timetable and customer service issues and finding itself in need of a phalanx of service workers.

These are the new underclass – the customer service, delivery, and retail employees who support the information economy, many of them highly educated millennials unable to find other work in a precarious job market. And unlike their blue-collar predecessors, they haven't been around long enough to unionize and demand a living wage and job security. Nor have they benefited from the sort of revolution that took place in auto manufacturing, led by Toyota – an approach that treated workers' ideas as the lifeblood of the business (with handsome profits to show for it). Instead, the new service workers are at the mercy of individual employers – not the best place to be in a buyer's job market.

[VIDEO] *Richard Florida on the ever-widening gap between creative workers and service workers, and what businesses should do about it.*

Richard Florida published *The Rise of the Creative Class* in 2002, at the tail end of the dot.com bubble. It focused on what he called “high bohemians” – a growing urban cultural/intellectual elite who, his studies indicated, were changing the face of business and technology. Having recently revisited and revised the book heavily for a new, 2012 edition, Florida says that the rise of the creative class has dangerously polarized the US economy by creating an ever-widening gap between creative professionals and service workers. The former are doing better than ever. The latter have it far worse than, say, automotive workers a few decades ago.

What’s the Significance?

Too many new businesses are treating service workers as disposable, and failing to provide for their workers’ human need to be more than a cog in a machine. Florida sees this as incredibly shortsighted. The lesson of Toyota, which rippled throughout the auto industry, was that treating workers as collaborators is good not only for their self esteem, but for the financial health of the business.

Florida cites companies like Amazon, Zappos, and Starbucks as the exceptions. These businesses, he says, have built collaboration and entrepreneurship into their DNA at every level. From the CEO perspective, the result is an organization that can adapt more efficiently to changing times and tastes, and that can manage itself more effectively by cutting down on bureaucratic processes. No company’s perfect, of course, but some are significantly more perfect than others.

More importantly, from the perspective of the nation, workers employed in these businesses are able to take personal initiative and to build careers. They’re professionally valued and treated with respect. This is a recipe for social balance and cultural health, as opposed to alienation and unrest.

Richard Florida sees some hope for American workers in the extraordinary success of these new, worker-centered businesses. While employers vary greatly when it comes to personal compassion and altruism, a healthy bottom line – in business circles – is the universal language.

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