



November 1, 2009

Prosper by honing valued skills

By George Vredevel

Many of more than 100,000 unemployed people in the Cincinnati metropolitan area will return to their old jobs as the economy improves. However, some will find that their old jobs have been permanently eliminated. This is one result of a recession.

Recessions lead to structural changes within organizations that go well beyond pruning of expenses. One advantage of structural change is that businesses become more productive and competitive.

At the same time, the changes extend the length of unemployment for many people and increase the costs they incur.

Is there a useful and hopeful message that can be given to those whose jobs have been lost?

My colleagues and I at UC's Economics Center for Education & Research investigated ways in which workers and job seekers could best adapt and prosper in this economy, where change is the norm.

First, job seekers must face the fact that their former jobs probably will not be resurrected. Then, they must determine which positions require their skills, even though these jobs may be very different from those they held previously. The search may result in a whole new career. While a new career may require retooling and retraining, it will not mean starting from scratch.

In many cases, an individual has skills that can be transferred from one occupation to another, and usually the "soft skills" are the ones that transfer best. They include skills in communication, problem solving and team work. Even in highly technical occupations, these skills are important.

In 2008, a national study by the Society for Human Resource Management asked employers to identify skills that have become increasingly important in the past two years. Top skills include adaptability/flexibility, critical thinking/problem solving, professionalism/work ethic, teamwork/collaboration and information technology application.

Note that with the exception of information technology, all of these skills are soft skills.

Our Economics Center selected 12 critical soft skills, including complex problem solving, originality, active learning, social perceptiveness and reading comprehension, and identified occupations in the Cincinnati area that use these skills most intensively. Surprisingly, they are technical in nature and include aerospace engineers, physicists and medical scientists.

We also found that the average income of these occupations is more than \$100,000 per year.

In general, the Cincinnati area workforce is rich in these critical soft skills - they are more than 5 percent more prevalent here than in the national workforce as a whole. This bodes well for our region's ability to adapt to changes and grow.

For current job seekers, the message seems to be: Take inventory of your soft skills and promote them. They may be more important than you initially thought.

For those who are planning for their careers, skills specific to an occupation will be important, but only so long as the occupation remains vital to the economy and continues to rely on those skills.

In this changing economy, it will be important to achieve a diversification of skills, including those that can be transferred from one occupation to another.

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