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## Guess What? The Sky isn't Falling

*Charlie Grantham and Jim Ware*

It's always fashionable to holler out that things are going from bad to worse. And the past couple of years it has often been hard to argue otherwise. So when we run across a couple of trusted sources of information suggesting that the USA's future is brighter than expected we have to bring that thought to you—assuming of course, you see *us* as a trusted source.

Joel Kotkin, one of our favorite urban geographers, is out with a new book, [\*The Next 100 Million: America in 2050\*](#) (link is to Amazon.com). Another *100 million* people! Where will they live? How will they live? Kotkin has tripped to a point we have been yammering about for awhile. Our favorite quote from the book:

*In order to accommodate the next 100 million Americans, new environmentally friendly technologies and infrastructure will be required to reduce commutes by bringing work closer to—or even into—the home and to find more energy-efficient means of transportation.*

Kotkin sees most of this new growth coming in the suburbs of major metropolitan areas. The pattern he illustrates is the same one we have noted: large central cities for the 20-Something's; suburbs for the 30-45 age group; and then the boomers split between smaller quaint towns and “boomer-friendly” communities in semi-rural areas (i.e., Sun City USA).

However, Kotkin believes the suburbs of 2050 will be a bit different from those 1950's-era mass-produced ranch homes that we associate with today's suburbs. They will, instead, be denser and more self-contained. Think of local energy production, suburban agriculture, and our personal favorite, localized “office space” within walking distance of your home.

This shift is going to require a major re-balancing of the community development equation. And it touches everything: transportation, natural resources, education, and public safety. The days of developers grabbing up large land parcels, putting hundreds of look-alike homes on it, getting rich, and moving on, are over—done, kaput.

So look for modest growth in major metro areas—say 15-20%, as the next 100 million settles in, but not a disappearance of major cities. Cities still have a major

cultural and symbolic function to serve. But the major population growth will occur in the heartland—near, but not necessarily in, existing cities.

Technology (specifically the Internet) is breaking down the isolation of rural communities. And, as Kotkin points out, roughly a third of the American population would prefer to live in rural areas that “*epitomize traditional values of family, religion, and self-sufficiency and as being more attractive, friendly and safe, particularly for children.*”

So why should companies care? Simply because this is where the people they want to employ will be. Those are also the people who want to be valuable employees—but who aren't going to sacrifice their quality-of-life preferences for a paycheck. And herein lies the rub: what are the socio-political implications of this shift in living patterns?

For a hint of that we turn to someone we don't often quote: David Brooks, a well-known columnist with the *New York Times*. How establishment can you get? Anyway, Brooks recently penned his own analysis of Kotkin's work (“[Relax, We'll Be Fine](#)”).

Brooks finds much to be optimistic about in Kotkin's analysis. He sees the new suburban growth as enhancing the United States' economic competitiveness, innovation, and constructive disruption of the world economy and society at large.

As Brooks points out, most of the population growth Kotkin foresees will come from immigration. The newer immigrant populations have higher birth rates than the groups that formed the 19<sup>th</sup> century wave—the Germans, Scots-Irish and Italians. And these immigrant populations are the future engines of growth for the United States. Between 1990 and 2005 new immigrants started one-quarter of the venture-backed businesses in the U.S.

As Brooks notes, “*We live in a global age of social entrepreneurship.*” America excels at disruptive change and community building (or was that organizing?). So this next demographic tectonic shift will bring us a new injection of that dynamism that is the hallmark of American life. But given technology, in combination with increased demands for a higher quality of life, this time that energy and innovation will come from mid-sized towns on the outskirts of major metropolitan areas—communities of 100,000 or thereabouts.

So, Mr./Ms. Executive, if you want that talent working for you, you'd better figure out how get to those places first—or at least figure out where they are and how to get the folks living there to buy in to *your* vision and get on board *your* train to the future.

## About the Work Design Collaborative and *Future of Work Agenda*

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Direct inquiries to either Charlie Grantham at [charlie@thefutureofwork.net](mailto:charlie@thefutureofwork.net), or Jim Ware at [jim@thefutureofwork.net](mailto:jim@thefutureofwork.net).