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In Our Humble Opinion: We Need a Department of Social Capital

Commentary by Charlie Grantham and Jim Ware

OK, so it's Labor Day again. And we have an election coming up in the United States. We wouldn't want to be left out of the debate, and since we haven't been invited to any of the political conventions we thought we'd offer up our humble opinion on some important policy issues.

Let's face it; our economy continues to slide into a cesspool of stagnation and poopy job prospects. We've yakked about this before, and we continue to be absolutely dismayed at the lackadaisical attitude of both sides of the aisle. One side keeps telling us how good things are while all but ignoring the numbers that say they aren't, while the other is overly obsessed with the very small percentage of jobs that being outsourced overseas, virtually ignoring the technology revolution that is making higher skill levels almost a mandatory requirement for practically every job that matters.

The "debate" seems to be "yatta, yatta, yatta" and zip, diddly-squat of substance. It feels like having four contractors all pointing at each other and saying the roof *might* be leaking but if it is, it's the other guy's fault.

Come on people, get serious.

More and more people are out of work, and traditional job creation has slowed back down to a trickle. And most of those folks who've lost good jobs but managed to get another one are making a bunch fewer buckos.

So, aren't they are OK? They're making a living, right? Give us a break. Maybe that's one reason personal bankruptcies are at an all time high? And what about all the folks who are so discouraged they've stopped looking for work at all and therefore don't even show up in the unemployment statistics?

Houston, we have a problem. First of all, we think those "public servants" who sit in state and federal buildings all over the United States are speaking the wrong language. The department of this, the select committee for that. If Moses had been a committee instead of an inspired individual leader the Israelites would still be lost in the desert.

Look, what we *really* need (hey, have you heard that before?) is a *coordinated* effort aimed at the root problem: we need programs that lead to job creation matched to the realities of today's global economy. Not burger flippers, hospital janitors, or gardeners. And *not* semi-skilled ("like, maybe I could read some day if I wanted to") industrial workers. By the way, that includes policies and programs aimed at encouraging at-home work and independent contractors, not just traditional full-time employment on someone else's payroll.

If we can get our act together to combat home-on-the-range security (although that's a bit debatable too), why can't we confront basic economic issues and the changing nature of work?

What this country needs is a jobinator! "Hasta la vista, underemployment. I'll be back with opportunities, baby!"

Huh? What the heck are we talking about? We've got federal Departments of Labor, of Education, of Welfare, and heavens know what else at the state level. Ever wondered why they call those offices that take care of jobless folks the "Department of Employment Security?" Good lord, George Orwell must be spinning in his grave. "We had to take away your job so you could go to work" (shades of destroying those villages in Vietnam in order to save them).

What we *really* need is a "Department of Social Capital," an agency that would bring all of this stuff together. We all know there is an actual link between what we teach kids in school and the type of jobs they can get and handle when they graduate. There's also a link between what goes on in the world and what kinds of businesses can prosper and be sustainable in the United States (and other countries too, of course). And there's a link between the quality of life in a community and the kind of folks who want to live there.

So why don't we pull all that together and make it work for everyone? Well, In Our Humble Opinion, we know the answer.

It's not happening in most communities because we're stuck with a bunch of old-mindset bureaucrats who run these perpetual misery machines. We'd like to see at least 50% of them fired. And while we're at it we could probably get rid of a passel of, excuse us, *elected* officials as well (but, then who would the lobbyists have to take to dinner and send on cushy trips to see how badly it's done in other countries?).

Sorry for the cynicism, it's just hard to keep quiet about the way the system is working for everyone except us poor folks out here called voters.

Let's dream a little. What if there were a place where business folks could sit down and say to educators, "Here's the kind of people we will need in five years, in ten years." A place where local communities could say "We need better environmental protection so people can breath the air in our town." A place where people could ask, "What should I be preparing myself to be able to do if I want to be successful" – and actually get an answer.

And what if we learned to look at the long-term social effects of what we choose to do – like spending a little more money now on early childhood health and education (and *parent* health and education), and then *not* having to spend billions of dollars on prisons and police and other social services later on.

Is it too much to ask that *all* the professionals who worry about the different parts of our social environment – educators, business people, parents, health care specialists, economists, psychiatrists, property developers, local officials – have one place where they can talk with each other, make joint decisions, collaborate, *and* hold each other accountable?

Wouldn't that be a good thing? Well, that's the kind of place – or agency – we think our country needs. But it isn't going to happen if we continue to reward governments and officials for duplicating their efforts, protecting their turf, and always pointing the finger at the other guy. We desperately need to look at the whole social environment just as comprehensively as we're beginning to look at our physical environment – to track all the causes and consequences in a truly ecological way.

It took a horrendous event like 9/11 to get across the message that we need to protect ourselves against some very horrible enemies (although look how long it's taking us to

understand what protecting ourselves really means, and what it requires from our leaders, our public institutions, and each and every one of us).

What's it going to take to get across a similar message about building our society's capability, about creating a social system and a civil society that will actually sustain our way of life? Hey, you know the Roman Empire missed that one, and so did the British Empire. Wake up folks!

Wouldn't it be refreshing to hear our political leaders (and candidates) actually have a serious, thoughtful conversation about what it will take to create a sustainable quality of life not just for the rich and famous but for all of our citizens – and to extend that conversation to include the entire planet?

All comments should be directed to comments@thefutureofwork.net. We'd love to publish your reactions and suggestions.

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

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Direct inquiries to either Charles Grantham at +1 928 771 9138, or charlie@thefutureofwork.net, or James Ware at +1 510 558 1434, or jim@thefutureofwork.net