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Review of:

The World is Flat: A Short History of the Twenty-First Century

by Thomas L. Friedman (Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2005)

Reviewed by Jim Ware

I am in real danger of sounding like Chicken Little. It feels as if almost every month I shout at you to “read this book, or you will die.” But this time I really, really, *really* mean it.

Tom Friedman’s *The World is Flat* is getting a lot of press these days, and it is all well-deserved. This is frankly the first nonfiction book I can remember being such a page-turner that I almost literally can’t put it down.

What is so compelling?

Friedman is a journalist – for the *New York Times*. Most of his weekly columns are about the middle east and politics. But this book is about the world economy as well as what it means to each and every one of us as individuals and as managers. I gather some economists have panned the book, because it’s filled with anecdotes and case studies rather than data. But those stories are exactly what makes the book so compelling, so unforgettable, and so important.

Friedman’s core thesis is a simple one (and may not even sound profound to readers of this newsletter): the incredible convergence of ten “flatteners” over the last decade or so has leveled the economic playing field to such an extent that our future is absolutely guaranteed to be unlike anything we have ever known.

No, let me say it more directly: our *present* – right now – is already radically different. The world economy is flat; it doesn’t make any difference if your business is based in Baltimore or Bangalore; technology (and several related factors) have put your business right next door to every other business anywhere in the world. But the catch is that those entrepreneurs in Bangalore have radically lower costs in the areas that matter than do their neighbors in Baltimore.

So what, you say. “That’s nothing new; we’ve been coping with outsourcing for a decade already.” But this isn’t just about outsourcing – it’s about global communications, global labor markets, business process decomposition, competition for educated talent, Ricardo’s principle of comparative advantage, international politics, energy independence, terrorism, and a whole lot more. The scary part of this book is the future that Friedman projects for us if we don’t come to grips with the realities we are living with right now. Because it takes 10-20 years for the full impact of these competitive challenges to work their way through our educational system, our political system, and our mental systems, and....

So, back to what's going on. Friedman focuses on ten "flatteners" that he suggests have driven us to a entirely new kind of world:

1. 11/9/85 (not 9/11, but 11/9 – the fall of the Berlin Wall)
2. 8/9/95 (the day that Netscape went public)
3. Work Flow Software
4. Outsourcing
5. Open-sourcing
6. Offshoring
7. Supply-chaining
8. Insourcing
9. In-forming
10. The Steroids (you'll have to read the book yourself to find out what they are)

I keep wanting to describe these flatteners and tell Friedman's stories. But he's a lot better at telling his stories than I am – and I want you to read the book, so I'll do my best to avoid rewriting the whole book.

But wait – here's the most amazing story (at least to me) in the entire book; I just can't not share it with you. When you order a hamburger at the drive-through window of a certain McDonald's restaurant in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, the person taking your order is about 900 miles away, at a call center in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The order is then zapped digitally (along with a digital photo of you and your car to confirm who placed the order) to the pickup window just 50 feet in front of you.

Why such a "crazy" business process? It turns out that a call center operator is far more skilled at taking your order, and working in a much quieter environment, than the kids at the pickup window – and the call center does it cheaper. The service is better, the cost is lower, everyone benefits.

And while you probably expected me to report that the order taker was somewhere in India, the point of this story isn't the death of distance, but rather that even such a "simple" business process as taking hamburger orders benefits from a flat world.

The point here is that we have to be willing to challenge all our assumptions about how things get done. And where they'll get done in the future. And by whom.

Which brings me to one final point: the implications of the flat world for our established economies, at least in the United States and Western Europe, are incredibly profound. Friedman does an excellent job of highlighting the dismal realities of our education system, our health care system, and our dependence on middle eastern oil in a world that is becoming a global battleground, where our assumptions about U.S. leadership and U.S. "entitlements" are simply no longer valid.

Friedman remembers that he grew up (as I did) in a family where he was often admonished to "finish your dinner, because there are people in India and China who are starving." Now he tells his kids to "finish your homework, because there are people in India and China who are starving for your job."

I'll be very surprised if *The World is Flat* doesn't win a bunch of awards and get declared the book of the year by someone. I consider it so important that for the past week or so I've been posting brief notes and excerpts from it on our [Future of Work blog](#). Go there to pick up more of the important stories, facts, and scary insights. But please, whatever else you do, *read this book*.

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

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