

What to tell the children?



RICK BRIMEYER
Brimeyer, LLC

He is president of the Ames, Iowa, consulting firm

August is back-to-school month. The stakes have never been higher. An intelligent, informed and practical friend of mine who has three kids in their upper teens recently lamented, "I don't even know what to tell my kids to study anymore."

Let's start out with some facts. Despite the rhetorical nonsense spewed during (and since) the 2016 presidential cam-

paign, the vast majority of job loss — 88 percent based on a study by the Center for Business & Economic Research and Ball State University — is due to automation and not globalization. It's much easier (and apparently, politically effective) to villainize Mexican and Chinese workers than faceless robots or computer servers.

Furthermore, the rate of change is, and will continue, increasing. Robo financial advisers and retail self-checkouts already are commonplace. Next up, robotic blackjack dealers and autonomous semis.

This can lead to a rather cynical, even scary view of a future bifurcated population consisting of the educated who identify and implement the next wave of automation and the uneducated who become displaced.

Thomas Friedman's excellent May 10 column, "Owning Your Own Future," states that the only way to guarantee lifelong employment is by embracing lifelong learning. To quote Friedman, "And that means: More is now on you. And that means self-motivation to learn

and keep learning becomes the most important life skill."

This "more is on you" is a continuation of a 30-year-old practice relative to retirement financing as pensions almost have disappeared in favor of employee-funded accounts.

True, we've been through this sort of transformation before as the mechanization of agriculture drove the percent of the labor force employed as farmers from almost 70 percent in 1840 to roughly 1.5 percent today. But that transition occurred slowly through the decades.

And, in most cases, displaced farmers were able to migrate to other relatively low-skilled jobs. Today's misplaced workers essentially need to reinvent themselves.

So how to advise the kids (and grandkids)?

Regardless of the grade they are entering, make it irrevocably clear that school matters. In his best-selling book, "Hillbilly Elegy," J.D. Vance describes a pervasive attitude of "learned helplessness" among the displaced, a belief that choices made have little impact on the outcomes of one's life. Education is the primary defense against displacement.

Encourage kids to identify aspects of jobs they might enjoy rather than declare what they want to be when they grow up. The latter causes fixation on a specific job that might or might not be available in the future.

Get kids involved in team activities and nurture their Emotional Quotient. The ability to empathize and connect with others

always has been a difference-maker, but is becoming a truly distinguishing characteristic.

Regardless of how "real" robots get, I believe there always will be consumers

RICK SAYS

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willing to pay a premium for some services from a person.

Don't panic if your youngster's interests tend toward hands-on activities. Think trades. Excellent opportunities will continue to exist in HVAC, auto service, construction and advanced manufacturing. I foresee automation perhaps replacing some of the most physically demanding tasks in these fields, thus allowing them to remain viable options into their later years.

Realize that success in the trades will require strong comprehension, people, math and problem solving skills. So school matters. Also, depending on your school district, your child might have wonderful or dismal opportunities to explore trades. Unfortunately, some of the best college prep high schools are the most lacking in trades preparation.

I'm not sure if this results from needing to focus on a niche because of inadequate state funding or a lack of demand from students due to a pervasive culture that college is the only path to success. If your trades-oriented child is in a weak district for trades, you might want to consider open enrolling in a neighboring district and/or exploring apprenticeship opportunities with local employers — most of which are extremely open to finding good, long-term employees. In any event, more is on you.

Finally, help kids explore various means of learning and discover which are more or less effective for them. For her 8th birthday my granddaughter's want list contained a number of "frilly" items typical of her peers. We got her a beginner's programmable robot. The look of surprise and confusion quickly turned to excitement as she started to learn its potential. Game on.



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