



While elites debate geopolitics, Americans are rethinking college in the search for economic mobility

By Ed Mitzen

At the [Davos World Economic Forum](#), the most powerful government leaders and tech billionaires gathered for their annual open discussion around geopolitics, growing economic uncertainty, technological acceleration, and most notably the rising potential of artificial intelligence (AI) to radically reshape human civilization as we know it.

In parallel, while these issues were being debated on a world stage, majority of Americans were debating their own growing concerns and projections about an equally profound transformation happening in their everyday lives at home and at work, albeit with considerably less clarity about what comes next.

While far from being overtaken by a sense of doom and gloom, American workers and their families are also

in no way ignorant of AI's transformative potential, not only regarding the future but the active and present force of change impacting how work is valued, organized, and rewarded in the era of AI-assisted labor. In fact, there are now some very clear indicators that Americans are paying much closer attention to shifts in the labor market than world leaders may think, and are already busy adapting to transformation as it arises.

TRACKING AI DISRUPTION IN THE LABOR MARKET

When we talk about AI-driven disruption of labor markets, it's important to avoid framing it as something that may or may not happen in some hypothetical reality many decades from now. While even the most rapid advancements in AI and technology at large tend to be experienced incrementally, making it harder to

fully process their implications, these tools are already transforming how organizations operate, with expert researchers at Goldman Sachs even suggesting [roughly 25% of all work hours](#) in the US and Europe could be automated in the relatively near future.

But it's also critical to note that, while still not an entirely invalid concern, the idea that such a projection indicates a complete replacement of human workers with AI-powered software programs is likely a red herring. Instead of AI taking over the workforce, it appears far more likely that the workforce is being reconfigured by AI, leading to a new and evolving paradigm that challenges human workers to dramatically adapt their education and career paths according to the needs of the economy.

In other words, as far as can be told up to this point, addressing AI disruption in the US isn't solely about dealing with widespread job loss; it's about job quality, durability, and carving out new pathways to the American Dream.

THE TRADITIONAL PATH IS NO LONGER ENOUGH

For longer than most Americans can remember, the long-standing assumption was that obtaining a four-year college degree was the clearest path to career success and financial stability. You chose an area to study, earned a credential as proof of your education, and got hired at an entry-level white-collar job before attempting to scrap your way up the corporate ladder.

Of course, there are plenty of obvious issues with such a pathway that pre-date rapid AI integration, but whether you consider yourself a champion of this model or not is now largely irrelevant; there are simply too many factors actively exposing the limitations of our traditional approach to education and employment, from employer needs shifting at the near-incomprehensible speed of technological advancement, to university tuitions offered at higher costs and with fewer promises of career opportunities and professional development.

While one symptom of this unprecedented shift is that it's more difficult than ever to predict what the future will look like, it does seem increasingly clear that the resilience of the American workforce is already becoming less defined by generic credentials and more by trained skills, adaptability, and human judgment.

WHAT AMERICANS ARE TELLING US: SENTIMENT AROUND SKILLED TRADES IS SHIFTING RAPIDLY

Arguably, much more valuable than the predictions of AI executives is the real-world outlook of the everyday workforce, and according to data from a Harris Poll survey we recently commissioned via the [Business for Good Foundation](#), a dramatic and widespread shift in the sentiment of American workers is already well underway.

More specifically, Americans appear to be changing their views intelligently and pragmatically based on careful observation of our current moment, particularly in their growing belief that skilled trades are on track to play a much more central role in the US economy, as well as their understanding of what that could mean for the future of education and professional development.

When asked about education, 80% of Americans agreed that more people today are choosing trade training and certification programs over traditional four-year college degrees, while 75% said formal degrees already matter less than hands-on skills and practical experience in today's economy.

Beyond what workers merely believe to be required in terms of training and education, there is also a more foundational shift in how they regard the very notions of productivity and personal achievement, with three-quarters of Americans saying what they consider to be a "good job" today is very different from what it was just five years ago. Moreover, along with this pivot seems to be the perception of waning societal stigmas around trade-based labor, with 78% of Americans earning less than \$50K saying the stigmatization of blue-collar work is declining, a figure that rises to 83% among households earning \$100K or more.

WHY THESE CHANGES MATTER FOR BOTH BUSINESS GROWTH AND SOCIETY—AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

Organizations and leaders today must begin to recognize the close connection between this radical shift in public sentiment and the increasingly urgent reality of [widespread shortages in critical skilled labor](#), understanding and making strategic investments around the growing role of trade skills toward supporting economic infrastructure in the age of AI. In other words, organizations have every reason to treat evolving workforce readiness needs as an issue of regional and

business-based competitiveness, not just as an empty social afterthought.

But this also means recognizing that support for empowering the next generation of skilled workers isn't keeping pace with either AI adoption or evolving workforce sentiment, and without new and strategic investments to address training, affordability, and the development of clear pathways toward success, there is a very real risk of this moment becoming yet another missed opportunity to mobilize and impact positive change when it's needed most.

Through my community work with the Business for Good Foundation, I've learned that mobilizing a new, productive workforce can be surprisingly straightforward: pairing capital with targeted operational support. Across New York's Capital Region, our growing impact has come from this simple, replicable formula—capital combined with hands-on execution. As we expand nationally, we'll apply this approach to communities across the U.S., doubling down on workforce development by training youth, career switchers, and workers facing systemic barriers for roles that meet real, local employer demand.

Moreover, when leveraged thoughtfully and intentionally, this combination serves to not only strengthen local and regional economies but also provide historically underserved populations with access to previously unavailable opportunities, as well as a necessary hand-up from the pitfalls of systematic alienation and inequality. However, I'll be the first to admit the impacts of this kind of work won't be meaningful enough to drive change if limited to the New York Capital Region, which is why I invite all like-minded business leaders and philanthropists to leverage all aspects of this model in their own communities across the US.

These are all issues that matter now more than ever and simply can't be divorced from the emerging impacts of AI on the US economy and labor markets, underscoring the urgent need to reimagine philanthropic initiatives not merely as charities but as critical to developing effective workforce strategies in our changing world.



Ed Mitzen
Co-Founder, Business for Good Foundation
bfg.org