

# STATE GOVERNMENT



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# The New Service Economy and Its Implications for the Future

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by Audrey C. Cohen

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## The Challenge

As a nation, we are on the verge of one of the most fulfilling times in our history. Presently, over 75 percent of all Americans work in the service sector of our economy, and by the year 2000 that figure is expected to reach 85 percent. Service, a value which our society has always held in high esteem, passing it down from one generation to the next, has now become the way we earn our living. Now, more than ever, it is crucial that we learn to serve others — not just because it is a positive, altruistic good, but also because by doing so we will be learning to survive and prosper in the service economy.

The problem, and our greatest challenge, is that neither education nor work as presently structured prepares us or future generations for this transition. How do we know this to be true? The symptoms are all around us. One such symptom is the fact that, despite our dramatic technological advances, we are falling behind in world economic leadership. What can we do about it? The schools we attend, the businesses and agencies in which we're employed, and the communities in which we live are all dramatically out of sync with each other. A total shift of all these disparate elements of our society to an ethos of service is required.

## Problems Our Nation is Currently Facing and Possible Solutions

*Why is there such a high level of disillusionment among our nation's youth, as*

*evidenced by the increase in drug use, vandalism and the school drop out rate?* The main reason is that many of our students' school experiences lead them to believe that there is no purpose whatsoever in remaining in school. The system does not teach the connection between life in the classroom and life in the outside world. A solution would be to have an educational system that gives these students a sense of purpose by showing them that A) What they learn is directly relevant to their own lives and B) What they learn can be applied and used to make a positive difference in the world.

One strategy would be to have each high school and junior high school semester focus on a purpose that teachers could directly relate to their students' lives and to service. All the classes that the students take would relate to that purpose. For example, in a junior high school semester focused on *improving service to the community*, all the knowledge of the semester, from the origins of American inventions and the use of the scientific method to the use of writing, and measurement in mathematics, would be focused on how the knowledge can inform the student's effort to improve service to other citizens.

Students, then, could take what they have learned and apply it to their internship or work site. For instance, one child might organize special activities within a day care center that would enhance the socialization skills of the children. Such an approach that takes knowledge and theory from all disciplines and applies it to a focused purpose that is meaningful for students in their daily lives, both within

and outside the classroom, would make learning come alive. This would motivate students to stay in school — and to learn.

*Why have we produced an entire generation of professionals who are specialists?* Effective leadership for the service society demands people who are capable of looking at issues in a new, multi-faceted and comprehensive way — leaders who see the big picture. The machines of the new technology, although continuously expanding their ability to give us knowledge, thus far can only think in a linear, and therefore, limited fashion. In a service economy, the linear approach is not sufficient. We will need leaders who can use that knowledge in a total context viewed from a variety of perspectives, the way the human brain naturally functions, to solve a multiplicity of problems.

For example, the regional planning of states' natural resources requires knowledge of *supervision, teaching and communication, and the management of change*, to name a few of the critical areas of activity that are necessary for productive service. We must begin to see that successfully accomplishing the goals and purposes we face in life requires an understanding of the broader implications of our actions. The solution is to develop generalists who think in depth from a variety of perspectives and who are flexible and adaptable at solving problems.

*Why are so many of our citizens self-centered and ill-equipped to think beyond themselves?* The problem with a "me" generation is that it leaves very little room for a "you." Since it is the integral focus on people that makes the service economy so unique and exciting and that differentiates it from all others, we need a system of education and work for the service economy that is organized

around helping other people. Such a system, in which businesses, service agencies, schools, families and the whole community work together, would help students develop an understanding of the relationship between one's own needs and the needs of others.

A solution would be having students perform "constructive actions" at businesses, hospitals, homes for the aged and other sites within the community. For example, in a high school semester that has the performance area of *maintaining health and well-being* as its primary focus, a student working with a withdrawn and lonely widow in a senior citizens' center could help her find new interests that would restore her involvement in life. Since all the knowledge covered in the semester, from biology to American history, was organized around health and well-being, the student could easily apply what was learned to the world outside of class — in this case, a center for senior citizens. Of course, such community service has value in and of itself, but the constructive action goes beyond this — it is a way of building a bridge between knowledge learned in school and action. In such a system, everyone, both the giver and the receiver of service, benefits and the result would be a "we" rather than a "me" generation.

*Why do we have so many educated citizens who don't know how to use what they have learned?* It isn't the mere acquisition of knowledge but the way people use it that makes the critical difference. Knowledge divided into traditional disciplines without a common purpose just doesn't fit into a service-oriented educational system. Everyone working in a service occupation, if they are effective, improves the lives of others as an integral part of their job. Thus, the rise of the service

economy gives us the potential to create a society in which one's success is determined by helping other people.

A service curriculum, therefore, would have no departments and disciplines as we now know them. All of the knowledge taught would be organized around purpose, a separate performance area of effective human service practice covered each semester. If we turn education right side up and focus knowledge on purpose, rather than the present system in which knowledge is serendipitously accumulated, we'll have a process which radically changes the way people think and act.

For example, in the Business Program at the College for Human Services, one semester is focused on *developing a marketing strategy*. A student learns in the classroom how the concepts and theories of Freud and Shakespeare, as well as Smith and Keynes, are connected to the focus of the semester. Each week at their respective corporations, students use this knowledge to develop, for example, a program to help customers use a new banking service.

In this way material from the liberal arts and the business disciplines would be directly related to the particular purpose being covered. Thus, instead of seeing knowledge as a pile of static material lumped into various categories, we could envision the vast body of knowledge as being a living crystal, growing in all directions simultaneously. When such theoretical learning is integrated with practical experience, from the very beginning of the educational process through graduate school, students develop the ability to not only think critically but also to apply what they learn.

*Why have values become a major national issue?* One of the most destructive problems our country is facing is the flagrant lack of moral values and ethics among so many Americans. It's no wonder when we have a system that either teaches ethics and values abstractly, or doesn't teach them at all. We must begin to realize that people cannot think, work or live in a moral vacuum. A nation such as ours, at a new stage of development, requires a new value system — one built around service. Knowledge and action must be informed by a value base. We must recognize the fact that service is everywhere and that all of us perform a service role — from parents raising children and teachers in the schools, to corporate managers and state governors. Without a strong service ethic, the service society is impossible.

Fortunately, it is possible to teach a strong service ethic. It's done by showing people that seemingly abstract values have a great impact on themselves and others by relating subject matter to service in the community. For example, in an elementary school semester focused on the performance area of *improving the environment*, students would learn the connections between the semester's focus and all the knowledge studied during the semester, from George Washington's willingness to commit himself to service to the community and nation, to Rachel Carson, whose writing of *Silent Spring* encouraged thousands of people to work for the improvement of the en-

vironment, to physically going out and testing the local water supply and analyzing the results in a science class. One child's constructive action could be organizing his/her friends and neighbors to set up a playground in a vacant lot. Each child would assume responsibility for a different constructive action and each one would use the knowledge learned in the classroom to improve the world outside.

In this way we will develop a generation of activists — people who are keenly aware of the world outside and who act positively on that awareness. We must remember the ultimate goal for people living in a service society is empowerment. This means that people would become increasingly more effective in managing their own lives and in recognizing and meeting their own needs and the needs of the citizens they serve. This would also help others to fulfill their potential as creative, responsible and productive members of society.

*Why is our nation so fragmented instead of being a cohesive whole?* In our society we erroneously encourage such a fragmentation by putting home, school, work and community into separate little boxes. A successful service society demands that we see the inter-relationships between these various autonomous institutions, and that each see the responsibility of itself and of the others and operates in a spirit of cooperation and unity. The present generation can pull the disparate units of society together

and it is our hope that the ideas presented in this paper will help make this possible.

### A Conclusion and a New Beginning

In the years ahead, America will need a work force that knows how to turn facts learned in school into creative thinking on the job and positive involvement in the community. It will need citizens who are conscious of their responsibilities to others and to society in general. In both areas, a new form of collaboration between the employers in the community, the educators, the parents and the school system is the key to America's future. The problems America is confronting today can be solved — the solutions suggested in this paper can provide a solid foundation upon which a successful, effective service society can rest.

Society is ready and eager for a new social initiative of major proportion. We are in a difficult stage of transition and we need effective leadership for the world of service which will dominate the 21st century. This paper is offered as an outline for the new society. We are indeed on the threshold of an exciting new beginning. The service revolution provides the spark — and we can't afford to fail to take advantage of the opportunity.

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*Ms. Cohen is president and founder of the College for Human Services.*