

Some Concerns about Our Future



Trying to keep up with the future is important to any business. With rapidly changing markets, consumer uncertainty, and an economy that can be driven by events half a globe away, pundits have been filling our bookstores with their take on the future. They give us grand visions of online communities of home-office workers and globe-trotting managers linked to internet shoppers through new systems just over the edge of the electronic frontier.

These visions, however, seem to focus in only two directions: what the future business climate will look like and the characteristics of the consumer of the future. What they rarely examine, though, is who, exactly, will be doing all of this work.

In January of each year, the New Hampshire Department of Education releases the results of a study that should interest every manager who is looking ahead. The Youth Risk Behavior Survey provides a rare and intimate glimpse of some of the qualities of our next generation of New Hampshire employees. Conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the survey aims to measure our high school students' perceptions of and participation in such risky behaviors as drug and alcohol use, unprotected sex, and the like.

The Centers use this information to determine the future of their educational and funding efforts. In the spring of 2007, 1,638 ninth through 12th graders at 61 schools throughout the state were asked to answer the 99 question survey. View the information for yourself at www.ed.state.nh.us.

Much of the news is predictable and good: Fewer students are smoking (although increased use of other forms of tobacco like snuff, dip and chewing tobacco has increased). Fewer of them report riding in cars without seatbelts. Physical activity seems to be on the increase, with close to half our students reporting at least 60 minutes of physical activity for five or more days each week. Eighty-nine percent had received vital information about the spread of HIV/AIDS, demonstrating that prevention efforts are reaching them.

But the results also contain some disturbing news for those of us looking ahead. For example, in the past 12 months, nearly one-fourth of our high schoolers have “felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks in a row” that they stopped doing some usual activities. Even more reported having been in a physical fight in the past year (27 percent), nearly one out in five had carried a weapon such as a gun, knife or club in the 30 days before the survey, and a significant number (4.5 percent) reported that in the 30 days before taking the survey they had been too fearful for their own safety to attend school.

Dig deeper and you'll find that less than half (41.4 percent) reported feeling as if they mattered to people in their community. Maybe most alarming of all: 15.5 percent of New Hampshire teens reported that their “parents or other adults in their family never or rarely talk with them about what they were doing in school.”

It would be bad business for me as a family scientist to tell you that I know what these numbers mean. But as an observer, a parent, a professor whose job often involves making hunches, and a researcher who bets hours and years of study on those hunches, I can make an educated guess: Our young people are very connected, yet they feel very unattached.

Think about it. They watch more TV and spend more time on the internet or text messaging, but have less “face time” with family and friends. They spend a lot of time at school but feel increasingly threatened and alone there. They connect with others at the speed of light, but does that connection translate into the human experience of connectedness?

I had a great teacher in my life, one of the founding fathers of American psychiatry, Dr. Karl Menninger. “Dr. Karl,” wrote more than 30 books and conducted countless studies in his nearly 95 years. Nothing he ever wrote or ever said, however, has meant more to me than one simple sentence he uttered more than 30 years ago:

“What every person on this planet wants, yearns for, craves, needs, and will do anything to get, is a sense of belonging,” he said. Menninger believed that “belonging” was the most important ingredient of a sane or whole human psyche. This was very important to him because, as he once wrote, “a sense of belonging gives us hope and without hope, we have no future.”

When looking into the future of New Hampshire workplaces and the communities that will employ and sustain our employees, I predict a future where that sense of belonging may be harder to find, where our virtual connectedness may threaten our capacity for belonging. If we don't address this dichotomy, I predict a future workplace where our next generation of employees, who are already feeling a bit hopeless, will increase some of the risky behaviors we know can result from being unattached: violence, despair, and disregard for others.

So, maybe, as we prepare our businesses to survive recessions, loan scandals, and changing consumer demographics, we should spend time thinking about the attitudes, perceptions and risks of those who will be doing the work. Maybe it's time to do some thinking about and planning for their survival.

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