

How to Stay Competitive in a Global Job Market

by Andrea Coombes

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Whatever job you do, looking over your shoulder to see who is coming up behind to take your place won't do you much good these days. The increasingly global nature of the workplace means your competition may be nowhere in sight.

That's true whether you've watched your manufacturing job head offshore or you're a worker still in high demand stateside--a nurse, say, or certain engineers--and any worker in between.

"Now you're competing with workers on a global scale," said Tom Kochan, a professor of management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management and codirector of MIT's Institute for Work and Employment Research.

The question is how do U.S. workers stay competitive when companies can pick and choose from workers across the globe? Talk to any expert in the field and the first words they're likely to say are "the ability to communicate well."

But that's not all. Here are six additional strategies to consider that will keep you ahead in the worldwide rat race:

1. Become a lifelong learner

If you figure school was what you finished when you were 22, think again.

"The 21st century will be the century dominated by ... complexity," said Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, a professor of globalization and education at New York University and coeditor of the book *Globalization: Culture and Education in the New Millennium*.

All workers will need to maintain a lifelong focus on education and think of themselves as an "autonomous thinker who at the same time can work well in groups made up of people who are different from yourself," Suárez-Orozco said.

This doesn't necessarily mean going back to college. There are a variety of ways to continue learning, "from do-it-yourself to highly structured, regimented programs," he said. "We have immensely sophisticated new tools that enable people in very remote villages in Mexico, for example, to connect to the Internet and open up a whole universe of online learning and continuing education."

Kochan said that it is "the ability to upgrade and keep one's skills current over the full career cycle that is so important today. Technologies are changing and people have to move across jobs more frequently, so they have to make sure their skills transfer across jobs."

Most workers these days can't count on their employers to provide that kind of training. Employers don't have "an incentive to train people to be competitive in the external labor market," he said. "We've got to expand those opportunities so we make sure that all segments of our labor force have access to continuing learning and education."

2. Get the right schooling

At college, learn behavioral skills as well as skills related to your particular profession. That means learning "the ability to work in teams and to communicate effectively, to write effectively, to resolve conflicts and work in a coordinated way," Kochan said.

"It's the combination of a particular discipline or specialization and these abilities to navigate the modern world" that are key skills in a global workplace, Kochan said.

For instance, "at MIT we now have an undergraduate minor in management that's geared for the engineers and scientists, so they learn ... how to solve problems, how to communicate, how to develop leadership and negotiation skills," Kochan said.

"Slowly, in the best schools around the country, from the grade schools to the high schools, we're beginning to see a little more emphasis on teamwork, conflict resolution, communication. In the best universities, we're seeing it. But we're not seeing it spread rapidly enough to really meet the nature of the skills that employers are looking for today," Kochan said.

3. Think creatively

As technology increasingly allows for job automation, Suárez-Orozco and colleagues set out to find skills that resist that trend.

The skills "that will be irreducible, for now, have to do with this creativity premium," he said. The key piece is "the ability to interact with others, acquire information and explain it to others, persuade others," he said.

Again, communication is the key.

"What's critical for a successful work force in a developed economy--and we've seen this play out with so many of our clients--is the ability not just to analyze but to synthesize and tell a story," said Ravin Jesuthasan, a Chicago-based managing principal in the work-force-effectiveness practice of Towers Perrin, the Stamford, Connecticut-based firm offering human-resource and financial-management consulting services.

When workers have only basic analytical skills, the "cost differential makes it difficult to justify keeping that work in this country," Jesuthasan said.

For example, for an accountant, "it's not just you crunching numbers, but what do those numbers get used for, what is the benefit that person is looking for? You solved the problem as opposed to 'I can do the accounting,'" he said.

Flexible thinking is also critical. "If I'm running a team and I have a problem, I want different people to give me a different point of view. This requires individuals who are curious, cognitively flexible, tolerant of ambiguity," Suárez-Orozco said. "In the era of complexity, most problems are not black-and-white problems."

4. Take the lead

If you could bottle the qualities that make someone a leader, it would be a valuable product in the increasingly global workplace. Companies want to see people who can communicate their ideas and then encourage people to follow.

"Globalization and competition create chaos because change accelerates," said Kurt Ronn, president of

HRworks, a national recruitment firm in Atlanta.

"The constant of 'I'm going to do the same thing tomorrow that I did yesterday' evaporates in a global economy."

"When the world changes ... you need people who can lead other people in a direction."

That can be taught, Ronn said, though "I do think some people are probably a little more predisposed than others. But in a world of change if someone is comfortable with the constant, they're probably not going to be a leader in a new future."

Some companies have ramped up their leadership training of high-level workers, Jesuthasan noted.

"There is a lot that's being done in terms of developing leadership talent," Jesuthasan said. "There's a lot of coaching--that industry has taken off in a big way in the last two to three years, the whole leadership-development space."

5. Head overseas

For executives, experience working overseas will often set you apart, said Jamie Hale, a Dallas-based practice leader in work-force planning at Watson Wyatt, the consulting firm.

Clients often say that executives without overseas work experience "can't appreciate how different cultures operate and how business is done [in] a global organization," Hale said.

That desire for expatriate experience ties in to the need for good communication skills, Hale said. The companies she consults with often feel people who've worked overseas understand that need for good communication better than others.

"They can appreciate firsthand what it's like to not be there side by side, and know how important the communication aspect is. If we're always in the corporate office, we can't appreciate that the guy in China isn't there with us. If we're in China and we're trying to work with the people at corporate [in the U.S.], we can appreciate that difficulty," Hale said.

6. Ready, set ... ask questions

You know what the skills are; now how do you go about learning these essential yet abstract skills? Take new classes, try your hand at projects or skills you've never tried before, Ronn said.

"You're going to have to start taking risks," he said.

That means asking questions and assessing your current actions, he said. "What did I do today? Did I analyze any data, did I research anything? Did I create a project?" Ronn suggested as questions to ask. "Did I teach it to anybody else? Did I go into a situation that I wasn't comfortable with and ask good questions?"

And, the message to college students? "Stay in college. Complete your degree. Get a good disciplinary foundation in whatever career is of greatest interest to you, follow your interest, and balance that with a good broad ability to communicate and work effectively in groups and teams," Kochan said.

"Then, once you graduate, your education is far from over. You have to continue to keep it up-to-date."