

Lifelong Learning – The Weapon of Choice

Growing up in the '80s in a foreign, developing country, America represented hope for many people like me. It represented advancement, technology, better education and health care. It represented the equal opportunity to succeed and an unprecedented opportunity for personal advancement. Everyone wanted a piece of America and dreamed of studying in this great foreign country. Those who were lucky enough to study in the United States obtained better jobs when they returned and upgraded their position in society. As for myself, I have lived in this country since 1994, became an American citizen in the year 2000 and I am proud to be an American. Therefore, it saddens me to see that the reputation of the United States abroad is tarnished. To many people, the United States now represents oppression, opportunism and ignorance.

As Americans, it is important to look at the reasons as to why this great country has been branded with this unfavorable reputation. America is consuming 23 percent of the world's natural gas, 23 percent of world's coal and 40 percent of the world's oil. Overall our nation consumes almost 26 percent of the world's energy and natural resources even though it constitutes only 5 percent of the world's population. In addition, Americans use about 15 times more energy per person than does the typical developing country. When you think about the 2 billion people still with no electricity, third world anger and envy are not hard to comprehend.

Whether we like it or not, the United States today is the world's largest empire. America now has military bases in almost every country in the world. Based on the 2004 numbers, the U.S. military budget is 6 times larger than the second largest spender, Russia. Even if you add Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan, Syria, China and Russia together, their total military budget is only one-third of United States. Consider the fact that the U.S. military budget is as much as the rest of the world's military budgets combined.

No wonder the discretionary budget for the military constitutes over half of the nation's total budget. In contrast, our total education budget is only 7 percent. The current administration wants to increase the defense budget by 7 percent and homeland security budget over 8 percent while reducing the education budget by 23 percent in 2007. This approach of overwhelming military dominance in the world has taken a toll on our economy. Our national debt is growing rapidly and our economic leadership is being challenged from all sides. The rest of the world is catching up.

If we look at it from a technology and educational perspective, people living in

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other countries are already taking low-skilled jobs away from the United States because of the Internet and free markets. These are interestingly American innovations. In fact, between 2000 and 2004, Internet usage grew 125 percent globally, with only 105 percent of that growth in North America. In Europe, the growth was 124 percent, 186 percent in Africa and 209 percent in Latin America. America, however, continues to have respect and protection for intellectual property and boasts the best education system in the world. To date there are 4,000 colleges and universities in United States and 7,800 institutions of higher education throughout the world. In California alone, there are 130 colleges and universities. Only 14 other countries in the world have more than that number.

But the so-called “knowledge migration” to the United States has slowed down tremendously since 9/11 because of new government policies. America used to receive the brightest individuals from all over the world for higher education with many of them choosing to live and work here. America used to get many students who were educated and groomed by other nations and then sent here. Then the United States would give them higher education and keep many of them here. What a deal!

With the new government policies and America’s slipping image in the world, our country is losing the brain power it used to attract. Today, international students are choosing other countries to study in over the United States. In 2003 the growth rate fell from 6.4 percent to 0.6 percent and in 2004 and 2005 there was negative growth rate. Meanwhile, countries such as Great Britain and Australia have seen a large jump in their foreign student growth rate. Moreover, now with the Internet, Indian, Bulgarian or Chinese citizens do not have to live in United States to get a job from Honeywell, IBM, Microsoft or even from our company, Augusoft. They can now live in their own countries and do business in the United States freely.

Americans live in a new world where changes occur at accelerating speeds. This new world’s playing field has been leveled, bringing on globalization and outsourcing that are changing the world at an increasing speed. With the rate of advancing technology, the results of current acts will be seen in even five or ten years. So how we as Americans respond to change and position ourselves as a country will make a difference for future generations. America needs to survive in this new world and this can only be done through change.

In order to survive in this global economy and stay on top of competition, the first change that needs to be made is how workers are educated. Workers have to be specialized, adaptable to changing times and will need to continuously advance their knowledge if our country is to remain a world leader. Americans need to be able to move from job to job, horizontally or vertically. They must gain the skills and training not only for their jobs, but in many other areas as well – including personal growth classes enabling them to become world citizens.

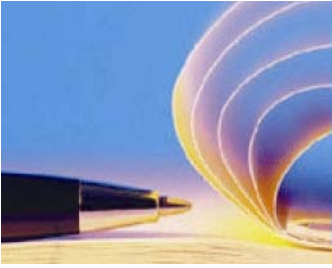
America’s education system is antiquated and does not fulfill the needs of today’s generation. The education system is designed for a different world of the past and does not meet the needs of today. To fulfill the needs of today’s generations, academic content needs to be delivered in new ways. In order to train adults and create an agile workforce, a system must be built different from the one originally designed to educate children centuries ago. I suggest that the educational system needs to be supplemented with a learning system, a lifelong learning system.

The lifelong learning concept is still young. LERN (Learning Resources Network) was one of the first associations started in the 1970s that concentrated on the importance of lifelong learning. With the invention of computers, lifelong learning became a necessity because people had to go back to school to learn new skills such as how to use a word processor or a spread sheet. Also in the new economy, the lifetime employment notion was replaced with lifetime employability as people no longer stayed in a job for 30 years. Corporations were struggling with costly on the job training while not having the time to send someone to school for years and wait for their education. Lifelong learning became the answer to these problems and the trend has since grown. In fact, according National Center for Education statistics, today only one-third of more than 16 million higher education students are considered “traditional” full-time students who are between 18 and 22 years old. The rest of the students are part-time or older adults, juggling family responsibilities, jobs and studies. In many states the non-credit learners surpass the for-credit students. Also traditional education has become more and more expensive. In the last five years, tuition at the University of Minnesota increased 77 percent and student borrowing increased 100 percent, leaving many to start their careers with huge debts.

By building a lifelong learning system, a generation of learners can be trained and educated to work in many different fields, giving them the ability to adapt and thus become more valuable to an employer. In addition, staff can give new efficiencies with increased flexibility to grow their program quickly and cost effectively to keep up with learner demands. Augusoft recognized that higher education institutions would need to support our workforce in the upcoming years. We have concentrated our efforts in the last 18 months on the development of a contract training module software and have been working with two of the largest vocational schools in the country to build a workforce development edition of our flagship product, Lumens®. Already many programs use Lumens, a Web-based software that is housed not in their PC, not in their school campus, not even in their city or state. Their organizations outsource the management of their software to an external company so they no longer have to worry about maintaining or upgrading software, but can concentrate on building, managing and growing a lifelong learning program.

Many lifelong learning programs are already participating in outsourcing by providing online classes to their learners. These online classes are created and serviced internally and outsourced to companies from California or Texas. Instructors can teach a class from Canada or even Australia and learners signing up for those classes may not be from your own community, or even your own country. Many lifelong learning programs use email marketing campaigns that can be outsourced through a company in their state or even in India. It doesn't matter where the company is located, your lists can remain secure and still be uploaded and messages delivered quickly and effectively.

A lifelong learning system can lead the way to a better world by innovating the process of human learning. A learning system can supplement our education system to provide learning opportunities for individuals to realize their full potential regardless of sex, language, religion, age or income level. Lifelong learning is a different business that requires different tools, different systems and a different mentality. Lifelong learning programs are not in the “teaching business,” they are in the “learning business.”



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Individual lifelong learning programs can make a difference. Forget about how to deal with change – become the ones who can make the change. We all have the power to touch people's lives. There is a new world that is changing at an accelerated speed and America's educational system must be supplemented with a lifelong learning system, which needs to become the weapon of choice for America to carry the beacon of civilization into the future.