

JOBS AREN'T ENOUGH BY ROBERTA REHNER IVERSION AND ANNIE LAURIE ARMSTRONG

This is both a book summary and background for the Human Capital Team Theory of Change.

Background

This book is worth the read. It is compelling – not in the fairly dry research findings but in the stories it tells of how real people have had to cope with systems that are disconnected and operating on old world paradigms. The old world thinking is that hard work and access to a job will allow anyone to succeed and thrive. We know that is not the case from all the things CSW does – this is a much different economy. Good jobs are harder to come by and there is a clear divide between those who have lots of skills and those who have few. There is not much room in the middle anymore for people with limited education and simply a good work ethic. We don't know what the impact is on the “old” middle class but we do have a pretty good handle on how lower wage workers fare in this economy – not well at all.

Key Themes

This may be a little hard to follow so read it a few times: **Successful mobility outcomes require developing and extending social and cultural capital along with human capital, as the weak ties of social networks and the sanctioned credentials that result from institutionalized cultural capital merge with human capital attainment to form a legitimizing signal for those who make mobility-influencing decisions about hiring, promotion, lay-off, and termination.**

What I get from this is affirmation that there is no easy way up and out of poverty and that there are multiple factors and systems at play that all need to align for someone to move out of low wage status. Skills and knowledge (human capital) are important but they are clearly not the answer in isolation. Many things have to come together so that there is a connection to human capital acquisition; connection to the networks that allow an individual access to good job opportunities; geographic issues around the reality that most good jobs are not where low wage earners are; the credentials that people get have to be respected by hiring authorities; and that there are many barriers to acquiring the right credentials and our helping systems don't really help overcome these barriers.

Certainly if we apply our mission of “re-imagining everything about work and learning” we can see many opportunities for how the acquisition of human capital (skills and knowledge) can be done differently and how that acquisition can be a part of work rather than an added burden.

Read some of the stories in Jobs Aren't Enough and you can easily see what is not working for people. These stories come from participants in the Annie E. Casey Job Initiative Program and while they show enormous perseverance that don't show enormous success. It is hard to do all that is necessary to get training and to still maintain a job and be a responsible parent – without the social support systems middle class workers have. The authors educate readers about the “**intersecting roles in economic mobility of stratification, poverty, education, workforce development, urban environments, gender, race, and ethnicity, families and institutions**”. That is a mouthful but the point is clear – there are many circumstances, systems, and factors (both personal and institutional) that have to align for a low wage individual to move out of poverty.

The authors contend that the three old paradigm myths (initiative gets you in the door; hard work pays off; and pull yourself up by the bootstraps) have driven public policy for many decades but they don't apply in today's economy. They posit that – “**multiple institutions are integral to economic mobility and the direction of institutional influence is simultaneously vertical and horizontal; economic mobility is a thoroughly relational process that requires social and cultural capital in addition to human capital; and choices and decisions integral to economic mobility involve cognitive and emotional processes; economic mobility pathways are increasingly dynamic and variable**”. This is pretty much a restatement of the complex opening but it bears repeating. The final charge is for significant change in the “public will” toward accepting that a healthy, thriving United States requires a reciprocity and cooperation among the social institutions of family, education, labor market, and state, toward acting on these realities.

Implications for CSW Human Capital Team Theory of Change

The learning from this book reinforces and perhaps better frames our thinking about what our theory of change is. Essentially, we are saying that:

1. The economy is different and continues to evolve and become increasingly complex.
2. Success in the economy is influenced by many factors – some internal and some external (our problem statement may not be far off after all).
3. Acquisition of skills and knowledge is a part of the puzzle – but certainly not the only issue. It must be viewed in a larger context of the whole interaction of multiple factors, situations, and personal circumstances to lead to economic mobility.
4. We need to address the acquisition of skills and knowledge both vertically and horizontally. We need to change the way people go about or are directed to such acquisition.

5. This acquisition can only be successful if it is done in conjunction with other systems that support a common outcome for the individual and do not follow program rules – but can follow personal rules.
6. This acquisition cannot be successful in the old paradigms of a linear sequence of school first – then work later, with the assumption that schooling ends when work starts. Not only must we infuse our systems with the notion of lifelong learning but also with the notion that learning has to occur differently – it has to occur within the context of work not outside of it.
7. There is an element of determining how much skill is needed and how to credential it – it may be a moving target as the economy changes and as individual needs and aspirations change but there is something unclear now about measurement that we need to address.
8. The likely drivers for change will be states where we have seen most innovation take place. We can look back to unemployment insurance and more recently to welfare reform as examples of state innovation. Our primary targets will be states that are ready to embrace change. But we will not ignore local communities.
9. Our allies and partners will be those who view skills and knowledge as critical assets that must be developed and then developed again.
10. We will use the framework of asset building to tell the story and to make the case for the need for skills and knowledge and the case for acquiring them in different ways.
11. Our work will be to find the connections between systems so that there can be better integration across systems.
12. Our outcomes will be better economic mobility for vulnerable populations. The concepts set forth here apply well beyond welfare leavers.