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**Review: *Putting Skills to Work: How to Create Good Jobs in
Uncertain Times*, by Lowe, Nichola**

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In the aftermath of World War II, a gradual but steady social contract emerged between labor organizations and business. This contract included commitments by the business sector to pay a living wage to workers and their families and to provide them paid vacations, medical plans, and retirement programs. Moreover, it included commitments to skill development opportunities through on-the-job training that would position these workers for upward advancement. For the most part, this contract lasted until the 1980s, when the federal government's resistance to passing legislation requiring fair wages, the declining power of unions, strong international competition, and increased automation coalesced to the point the contract began to erode. One of the most significant benefits affected by this erosion was company-sponsored skill development. Taking the position that the nation's educational institutions were better suited to train entry-level workers, the business community supported efforts to shift that responsibility to universities, four-year colleges, and community colleges. They were successful in this endeavor. However, while this approach prepared the worker for the world of work, it did not, and could not, provide the skill-related training specific to a company's needs. Moreover, it did not provide new workers the opportunity to develop their skills in the context of a company's corporate culture. The net result has been new workers entering the workforce without the required skills, leaving both employees and employers dissatisfied.

Professor Nichola Lowe has been researching this conundrum for many years and presents her findings in a well-written, well-researched, and thoughtful book which explains how the "de-skilling" of America has occurred, what is being done to address this issue, and how, through exogenous intermediaries, skill development can once again become an essential part of corporate culture. The premise of the book could not be clearer: on the first page, Professor Lowe writes, "America has a skill problem" due to ". . . the widespread failure of American businesses to share the responsibility for skill development." Based on this premise, she lays out her argument using three key points. First, skill development is more than preparing for an initial job-at-hand. It is tied to a strongly embedded comprehensive program providing opportunities for constant improvement through employer-sponsored training intended to broaden the prospects of incoming workers. Second, skill mastery confers shared value, as this worker becomes integrated into the processes of production. No longer a temporary hire, an intern, or an apprentice, this worker is now a vital resource for the company. The third, arguably controversial, point is the degree of ambiguity associated with skill development: who gets it, who pays for it, and who benefits? The answers to these questions can frequently cause friction. However, they can also lead to positive change.

Professor Lowe's findings are based on formal research, field work, and interviews with business leaders, labor officials, policy makers, and academicians over many years. Perhaps most importantly, she became keenly aware of the accomplishments of workforce intermediaries, who have been increasingly active in stimulating effective skill development in companies across the nation.

The book, tightly written, provides laser-like focus on the "de-skilling" issue. As such, its primary audience would, at first glance, appear to be policy makers dedicated to labor studies and economic development. However, a close read of the book unveils cross-current opportunities for local and regional economic development planners to better position themselves for retaining or expanding their economic base. More specifically, the text shows the benefits of linking vocational schools and community colleges into the economic

process through highly skilled intermediaries. Too often, economic development planners become involved with local businesses concerning workforce issues when it is too late to make a difference. By working with them in a linked manner and in a timely fashion, this approach can potentially help them to recover. This book provides many examples where these planners can become informed.

After its introduction in chapter 1, “Our Skill Problem Today,” there are five additional chapters. Chapter 2, “(Re) Placing Skill in the Workplace,” focuses on two significant points.

The first explains the difficulties in defining the term “skill.” Is it based on showing competencies in a single operational procedure or on a set of machines? Is it determined by diplomas, degrees achieved, certificates awarded, and/or test results? And are “soft skills” such as professional demeanor, good work habits, and communication abilities part of the equation? In the words of the author, “Skill is inherently ambiguous.”

Chapters 3 (“Mediating Skill”), 4 (“Skilling the Next Generation”), and 5 (“Reinterpretation Writ Large”) are linked together to illustrate and explain the various means and methods through which workforce intermediary groups have emerged to assist companies in skill development and to create clear paths for advancement. At present, there are approximately one thousand such organizations across America. They have been formed by labor unions, labor-management partnerships, workforce organizations, and even business-led entities. While initially created with the intent of assisting disadvantaged potential workers by connecting them to vocational schools, community colleges, and certificate programs, some have become “dual-customers.” In this instance, they endeavor to match the programmatic needs of companies with the skill sets of people emerging from school-based training. Based on in-depth interviews with a wide array of stakeholders ranging from academicians to workforce development practitioners and workers, Professor Lowe focuses on how workforce intermediary groups have been established, the purposes of the organizations, and, to varying degrees, the groups’ effectiveness. More specifically, chapter 3 explores the successful experiences of intermediaries working in Chicago, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, and Pittsburgh, which involved opening opportunities to job seekers without college degrees. Chapter 4, in essence, is a case study of a Chicago intermediary organization’s efforts to place Black high school students in manufacturing careers while working within the confines of a large city’s educational system. Chapter 5 includes an in-depth explanation of the outstanding work of the North Carolina community college system as it endeavors to open paths for under-educated workers to jobs in the state’s expanding high-growth manufacturing firms. Both academicians and practitioners dealing with economic development have long looked with a bit of envy on this system’s accomplishments. Professor Lowe’s summary of its efforts alone will provide readers with food for thought.

Chapter 6, “An Inclusive Innovation Future,” concludes with a concise commentary on how leading-edge companies are embracing more adaptive and welcoming methods to attract blue collar and less-skilled workers. Moreover, it focuses on the significant work of the U.S. Manufacturing Extension Program. Now more than thirty years old, it has been highly effective in addressing a wide variety of business needs, including issues related to

skill development. Its importance also rests on the program's presence in each state and strong record of partnering with other organizations. Provided the federal and state governments continue to fund its programs, it has the potential to become an even more important participant in the quest to expand the creation of, and support training for, good jobs. Finally, Professor Lowe closes the book with a reminder of the compelling evidence that technology companies can be inclusive of blue-collar workers and that innovation need not result in the elimination of jobs. Perhaps more importantly, she calls for the nation's educational institutions and business communities, working through intermediaries, to bring about substantive change.

As praiseworthy as this book is, there are two areas of concern. First, and through no fault of the author, it was researched and written at a time when the economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic had yet to be fully felt. It is common in times of economic uncertainty for businesses to control costs by increasing automation and redesigning work processes. By so doing, jobs involving routine tasks are regularly reduced. Should similar actions become common by the end of the pandemic, the need for workforce intermediaries will only increase. In any case, the post-Covid work- force and workplace are likely to experience significant changes. Second, while I am a strong supporter of efforts to make business more responsive to the public good, I am also aware of its need to remain financially viable. The examples cited in this book did not provide any meaningful evidence of how the efforts undertaken by intermediaries influenced the financial positions of these companies. For better or worse, as intermediary activities continue, this factor must be made clear. In sum, for the good of us all, I only hope the efforts of intermediaries to bring change will create positive benefits for workers, the business communities, and our cities and towns.