

## Blue-Collar Blues

***As the economy rebounds, can we transform America's service sector jobs into higher-paying careers?***

by [Nancy Cook](#) May 17, 2010

As the economy recovers and Americans get back to work, [the wage gap](#) between white- and blue-collar work is expected to grow. According to [new data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), 60 million people—46 percent of the American workforce—in 2009 worked in the service sector as cashiers, office clerks, cooks, nurses, retail salespeople, or customer-service representatives.

But rather than consign nearly half of the nation's workers to relatively low-paying jobs, why not use the recession as an opportunity to make over service work into something fulfilling and analytical, hopefully with higher wages? So asks Richard Florida, professor, social scientist, and author of the bestselling book [The Rise of the Creative Class](#). Following the release of his latest tome, *The Great Reset: How New Ways of Living and Working Drive Post-Crash Prosperity*, NEWSWEEK'S Nancy Cook asked Florida about his vision for "upgrading" the service economy. Excerpts:

### **Cook: Why are service jobs so prevalent now?**

**Florida:** For the past couple of decades, we've seen a drastic transformation in service jobs. This comes from someone whose father worked in factory. After my father came back from World War II, not only had the economy improved but the manufacturing industry had become higher paying. My father was able to buy a house and put both of us in Catholic school. My mom worked a little bit part time, but our expenses were basically covered by his salary. That kind of work has now declined. Now, just 23 percent of all jobs are blue collar—from transportation to manufacturing to construction.

Meanwhile, two other types of jobs have grown. Government, education, media, science, and technology have been adding to what the Bureau of Labor Statistics calls business and professional-employment jobs—work that I have previously dubbed the [creative class](#). About 35 million Americans, or a third of our workforce, do those kinds of jobs. But, we've also been generating much lower-wage, lower-skill jobs in what we typically call the service arena: home health-care aids or landscaping. These jobs pay half of what a manufacturing job pays and a third of what a professional job pays. More than 40 percent of Americans are toiling in these jobs, which, in a way, look something like the way my dad's Italian immigrant family had to work multiple jobs in the 1920s.

We owe it to ourselves to make a national effort to improve these jobs. We will never generate enough manufacturing jobs to fill in the gaps, and not everyone can work in the creative class. It's very hard to offshore the person who cuts your hair or takes care of an elderly parent. Those

are the jobs we should make an effort to make better. No one in our national political dialogue is talking about this. People just say these are bad jobs. We can't give up on the work lives of 60 million Americans.

### **How could the country improve low-skill, low-wage jobs? And, are any companies already doing this?**

Companies need to try to engage workers and ask them to think innovatively about their work processes. Four Seasons, for instance, pays its workers pretty well. They provide bonuses and incentives for workers to be really engaged. Whole Foods is another example. If you think about most grocery stores, they treat employees as the enemy. Whole Foods started to treat workers like human beings and provide them with a decent wage. When I look at lists of the best places to work, it's usually a lot of high-tech and consulting companies. But, there's no shortage of service companies such as Best Buy or the Container Store that also treat employees well.

### **Rather than focus on creating better service jobs, shouldn't we also concentrate on educating a better workforce?**

In past economic "resets," we massively expanded public education for working-class kids, and this gave a big boost to our productivity. We not only expanded primary or secondary education to include more people, but we massively expanded our public-university system. This made it possible for ethnic kids like me and my big brother to go to Rutgers. Because of our education, we entered the professional cadre. The effort now to remake our education system [post-recession] will be bigger. We'll have to invent a new individually centered sense of education. I always hated school, and I'm a professor. I learned a lot by going to libraries, or by having one or two highly engaged teachers. It seems to me like there could be a more effective way of educating people. Lots of people in the creative class are starting to home-school their kids. It's about harnessing kids' basic creativity.

### **What is the future of service jobs in the next decade? How should these workers look for better opportunities?**

We will still have about 10 percent of our population making things because we like to use things. But we can make some personal service jobs into professional ones, like the guys who run the designer cupcake shops or high-end cheese shop or the designer food cart. Another example is my dad, who only has a seventh-grade education. He was good with his hands. He could work up his way up in a manufacturing plant. Service companies have the same type of structure. My dad became a foreman, and then a plant supervisor. He made a decent living and used to wear a blue collar and a white collar. He still went to the factory every day, but he went to meetings. That same example could be applied in the rush to build green buildings. If you think about who knows the most about a building's energy, well, it's the janitor who would adjust the heating and cooling systems and know about the insulation. Why do we only think of the janitor as the person who sweeps the floors?

By getting people more involved in continuous improvement in companies, the country will value service more. This may mean that we have to pay a little bit more to provide a better group of jobs. We may have to pay more for people to take care of our kids or elderly parents, but right now, the U.S. gets its services very cheaply.

