



By Lori Baer

Think of gold-collar workers as a lifeline. Since the only constant in these choppy waters of competition is change, to stay afloat your people must be intelligent and creative enough to solve complex problems, to engage technical skills, and to apply cross-functional knowledge of the workplace. These characteristics define the gold-collar worker. It's clear that rapidly changing technology and an international business environment have profoundly shifted competitive advantage from brawn to brain in this Information Age. It is this gold-collar working class that will generate the majority of Lancaster County's productivity, which will increase in direct proportion with the equity the county's workers hold in the form of applicable, competitive knowledge.

Professor Robert Kelley of Carnegie Mellon University coined the phrase "the gold-collar worker" in his book of the same title. Kelley described a new era of workers whose value is brainpower and used "gold" to reflect the handsome wages and profits their minds and skills garnered. These employees translate "... information into knowledge and knowledge into profits." When Kelley's book was published in 1985, these workers were understood as being young and college educated, and they specialized and accounted for over 40 percent of America's workforce.

Today gold-collar workers account for 65 to 70 percent of the workforce, and gold-collar careers in well-defined industries are the fastest growing job segment. The term gold-collar worker, as opposed to gold-collar job, is now applied much more broadly to describe highly skilled workers that span generations, regions, and occupations and whose minds are not only molded by college education but also through accreditation, certification, vocational, and proprietary training, and even personal and career experiences.

"Gold-collar careers will be, at least for the next 15 years, the most sought after of all high-paying positions," says Dean Bill Thompson, EdD, of Harrisburg Area Community College's (HACC) Division

Gold-Collar Workers Present Golden Opportunities

There is a productivity distinction between gold-collar workers and gold-collar jobs

of Business, Hospitality, Engineering, Technology, & Computers. "I see them evolving. The gold-collar careers of today will not be the ones of 10 years from now, but we will continue to have gold-collar jobs, and common skills and core competencies will remain fairly constant; it's those highly specialized skills—the application skills—that may differ."

Gold-collar jobs offer clear career ladders in industries with a potential for worker rewards tied to productivity and an expectation of healthy growth over the next generation. A gold-collar worker can be a help desk agent with

an extensive high-tech background, or a customer service representative hired because of an English degree, or the LEED accredited professional on a builder's staff. Gold-collar workers are machinists and electrical technicians; equipment, tool, and die makers; registered nurses and licensed practical nurses; automotive technicians and network administrators. Gold-collar jobs are the tractor beam for gold-collar workers.

For example, regardless of the present short-term business cycle disturbances, Thompson adds, "Things in the computer and manufacturing

areas will continue to be good choices, the IT area is excellent with relatively high-paying jobs, and even in a particular discipline—electronics for instance—an instrumentation specialist would be in a relatively high-paid discipline of electronics."

Education, Recession, and the Gold-Collar Employee

Today's education and training model requires focus not just on developing technical or scientific skills to sustain a lifetime of labor, but also on producing multidisciplinary students who are nimble in order to successfully ride—and carry their employers—over uncertain waves of technology and globalization-induced cycles.

The emerging model of workforce development trains new workers and retrains older adults by integrating primary and secondary education fundamentals with higher education and ongoing training throughout life. Colleges are addressing the citizen training of primary school, and high schools are collaborating with tertiary educators on dual enrollment and articulation programs. Traditional degree programs are expanding focus beyond a single academic discipline by equipping students with additional skills not historically covered such as business literacy, problem solving, and even confidence in 21st century education delivery systems like online learning.

"We have to equip our students with the ability to appreciate and master new technologies as they now change in ever-shorter life cycles," says Victor S. DeSantis, PhD, dean of graduate studies and research at Millersville University. "We have to equip our students to adapt, master, acquire new skills because the lifecycles of the technologies are so much shorter than they were."

If there's a class of jobs on which to place your bets for surviving the recession, it's gold-collar. In Kelley's book, he draws attention to unemployment rates during the recession of the early 1980s being 16.7 percent for blue-collar workers, 12 percent for white-collar workers, and peaking at 3.2 percent for gold-collar workers. The gold-collar workers' skills

set is so adaptable that job security comes through their own professional competence, not reliance on a company or prosperous economy.

The emerging question is not so much if the gold-collar worker can stay afloat during the recession with available and secure jobs, but rather will the gold-collar employer remain financially buoyant to keep gold-collar workers educated and adequately compensated? Employers view the recession through a kaleidoscope of variables: the ability to satisfy customers' needs despite cuts, the ability to maintain sufficient bottom line to avoid gold-collar layoffs, and the ability to budget for ongoing education needed to keep gold-collar workers progressive and productive in order to better serve customers, entice prospects, boost the bottom line, and survive into the long run.

Experts agree it's too early to understand the recession's affect on gold-collar jobs, but there's optimism that these jobs will trend with innovation, not the economy. Furthermore, student enrollment increases in a recession as people use time between jobs to retool skills or branch into new professions, increasing their flexibility and employability.

"We live in a great county and region of the state that, for the most part, is still a growth area when many other parts of the state are declining in terms of job creation and job retention," DeSantis points out. "We're a stable, growing area, which is very lucky to be in the year 2008. I would say that's mainly because of the strength of Lancaster's business and industry sector. Particularly, I would point to [the balanced diversification from] such sectors as agriculture and food, pharmaceuticals, and other health-related sectors."

The biggest promise for sustainable gold-collar careers is green technology. Desperate measures to find solutions to environmental problems are certain to carry an influx of new technology that commands new skills and jobs; however, what those jobs are remains to be seen.

"Green technology presents a very broad spectrum of careers—in anything from hazardous waste to alternative energies—but there aren't a whole lot of jobs in those areas yet," HACC's Thompson concludes. "But they will come in a flourish, and they will come heavy and fast within the next 5 years."

Colleges and training institutions report staying the course with multidisciplinary approaches to programming and ensuring that tools and resources necessary to support STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) disciplines along

with literacy in economics and the hard business sciences are cutting edge to equip future gold-collar students with the skills to guide green ideas from concept to marketplace.

The gold-collar worker is also in the driver's seat because demand for these workers is outpacing supply and is causing serious concern over a looming workforce shortage.

"If you look at the workforce and where it's headed in the future, there's this perfect labor storm coming because of the skills sets that are required, because more and more jobs require these skills, and because we're producing fewer people that have these skills, plus all the people that are currently in those positions are about to retire," explains William Griscom, president of Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology.

Griscom mentions that only 20 percent of the workforce requires a 4-year degree, with the 70 percent majority of gold-collar careers requiring a 2-year degree or equivalent, with some even requiring more skills training than college education. Yet, the majority of high school graduates today still believes that the only way to be successful is with a bachelor's degree. The result is a mismatch between skills obtained and skills required and valued in the workplace. Adding to the gold-collar worker shortage is a retiring generation of skilled workers.

Scott Sheely, executive director of Lancaster County Workforce Investment Board, agrees and goes further by saying, "Employers are experiencing that nearly every high-skill job is being reinvented by technology. So what we are finding is that because of increasing technology, there's increasing numbers of skills gaps. We talk about the workforce shortage coming in the next 10 years, but what doesn't get talked about as much is a skills shortage. Employers need to be aware of this because if you look at the number of people retiring in the next 10 years, it tends to be the most skilled workers right now. If you don't have some kind of a pipeline to develop those workers, you're going to be sitting without a skilled workforce."

What's an Employer to Do?

"I was talking to different companies about programming and things we are going to offer, and I get the sense that people are sitting on their hands right now with a kind of wait-and-see attitude," remarks Karen Sheehe, PE, PHR, director of continuing education at Penn State Lancaster, about the recession.

But just like a diversified portfolio and dollar-cost averaging protects exposure to investment risk, diversified and ongoing

training protects individuals and businesses from an uncertain business climate. The bright side to the recession may be the capacity for workers to step away from the production floor for training.

Sheehe agrees. "Typically when times are good, it's not that a company can't afford to up-skill its workforce, it's a matter of getting the time to do it because they're all working. I think now that things have softened up for some companies, they have time, and they could give their employees the time to up-skill, but the challenge now is the investment."

Options do exist for companies willing to exercise a bit of that gold-collar creativity in seeking funding sources or low-cost alternatives for fostering a gold-collar workforce—and remember, it's not just about training existing employees, but also about staying connected to the pipeline of qualified students.

Sheely discusses the Workforce Investment Act's Youth Council, which is the only required committee that a workforce investment board must have. Youth Councils reach out to K-12 and ensure educators have the most current information about career outlook, skills sets, and required knowledge base for these skills and jobs.

"The Youth Council's mandate is to work on the issue of building a pipeline from school to work. If we don't have pipeline from school to work, then where are we going to be in the next 30 years in terms of having the kinds of workers needed?"

"Employers have to think about the timing and sequence of all this—they have to do the incumbent worker training to get current workers up to speed, but then they need to have this backup coming through the pipeline to get additional people that will phase in behind that current line of workers."

- **Participate on industry advisory boards** – Have a voice in defining curriculum and advising on equipment that should be introduced to students and on the techniques and applications that modern industry requires. Call the training institution representatives for your area of interest, identify yourself as being from industry, and express your interest to serve on an advisory committee.

- **Teach by example** – Regardless of the short-term challenges, allow interns and cooperative education students into your business to experience real-world, on-the-job training. Also request to visit the classroom as a guest speaker or serve as adjunct

faculty, particularly at community colleges and technical training schools. Community colleges even look favorably at requests for 10 minutes at the beginning of class to talk about job vacancies and recruit right in the classroom.

- **Connect with the Lancaster County Workforce Investment Board (WIB)** – Not only is the WIB a wealth of information on regional labor trends and news, but it also serves as a liaison to funding sources that support training.
- **Take advantage of online training** – The internet as a resource for training provides cost-effective e-learning, can be done on the employees' own time and preference, and often provides training for as many staff you can cram in front of the computer.
- **Share internal knowledge** – Gold-collar workers are investments, so maximize their returns. Form study groups within departments to share information about current work and things managers and employees have read, heard, or studied on their own. When employees participate in continuing education, require them to transfer the information to the department or organization in a report or brief presentation. When managers or employees read a relevant book or article, they should pass it on to other staff so they can acquire the knowledge themselves.

Corporate Natural Selection

The business anchored by knowledge acquired through education assumes the responsibility of ongoing training in order to ebb with the fickle flow of the 21st century business environment. Technology, globalization, and the recession create an uncertain, complex, and rapidly changing ecosystem that no doubt will have businesses fighting for survival in the coming months and years. It's highly skilled, educated, clear-thinking, and self-directed workers that will sustain Lancaster County in the Information Age; brain over brawn determines business predominance.

Gold-collar workers are sharks for education and knowledge and have thought their way to the top of the corporate food chain. Just like any other, the business ecosystem reinforces survival of the productively fittest. Regardless of business cycles, it is the nature of companies who nurture gold-collar workers that thrive.