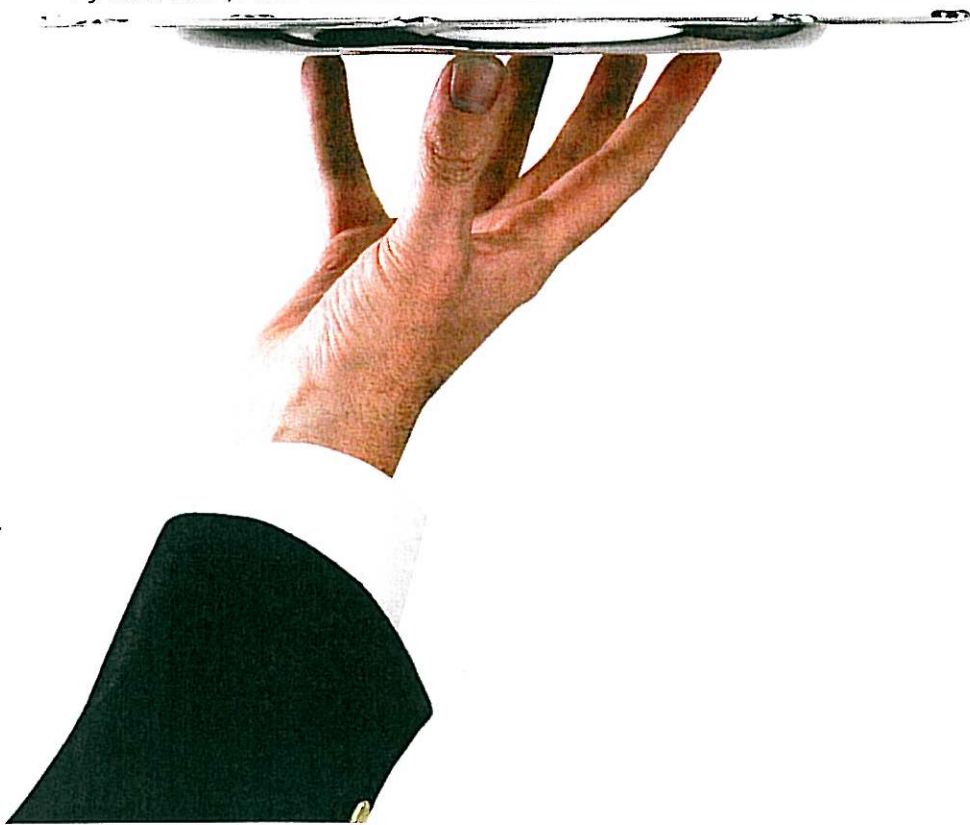


Serving the Servers Expectations in A New Economy

by Colin Read, Ph.D.



Our parents and theirs lived in a different world. A century ago, more than 40 percent of the workforce was engaged in agriculture. Now less than two percent of the workforce

minds the farm, and eight percent is now engaged in manufacturing. People lived where they could find arable land or resources, or where the manufacturing concern was located. And, just as a resource or

a piece of land could not be made mobile, nor were we. A hundred years ago, our hub, and the hub of every small town, was our town core. We could not easily move goods or people around. Hence our economies were primarily isolated and local.

My, how things have changed. Or have they?

Now service constitutes 70 percent of the economy and aggregates the fastest growing sectors in the economy – Information Technology (growing at nine percent), Professional, Scientific and Technical Services (growing at seven percent) and Retail Trade, which is growing at five percent.

At the same time, both the relative and absolute size of the manufacturing economy is shrinking as the manufacturing that can be moved elsewhere is moved overseas, and as the great leaps in efficiency of manufacturing and the supply chain bring the cost of manufacturing down.

While the structural change is dramatic, its implication on the way we live our lives is even more so. As we are freed from the farm, from the mines and forests, and from the factory floor, we realize that we can garner a livelihood by going where the people are. This characteristic, people serving people, creates an economic web that is more footloose, is more amenities oriented, and gives us the flexibility to make individual choices about where we live.

In some sense, our national preoccupation with outsourcing is misplaced. Outsourcing is typically in the manufacturing industries long since past and in some of the lowest value-added service sectors, precisely because these are the jobs that can be done by anybody, anywhere.

As the absolute and relative cost of our basic needs falls, we realize that we do not have to devote much effort to provide for basic food and shelter. Our higher needs are met less and less by manufactured goods, and more by the service sector. Travel, education, medical services, dining out, and entertainment now take up a large portion of our time and our discretionary income. And these services, by their very nature, are difficult to outsource.

As a consequence, we again have begun to rely more and more on local services, even as we avail ourselves of the services that can be delivered to our door

from places like Hollywood. No one will supplant the local plumber, landscaper, barber, doctor, nurse, teacher, taxi driver, cook, waitress, sales clerk, or contractor. A hundred years ago, people would not avail themselves of such services, because they did not exist locally or because one could not afford them. Now, such things are almost all we purchase.

How does this dramatic shift toward a service-based economy and the renaissance of locality affect what we demand from the places we call home? We are liberated in where we live, and can construct the surroundings we want. And we want it all – because we can, for the most part, have it all.

Young people, especially now, want a balance of serenity and excitement, the natural world and the amazing things humankind can create, a sense of history and a sense of innovation, and a sufficient scale to ensure that any service one can imagine is at their disposal. Young professionals do not measure themselves by the level of sacrifice they can muster, but by the range of amenities they can absorb. And they do not take comfort in the realization that they will someday enjoy a better life – they want it now.

They can also afford it now. Disposable income is higher than ever before, and the amount of services one can enjoy has been ratcheted permanently upward. This is the world of Home and Garden TV.

What are the implications of an economy in which almost all of us serve others and expect to be served in return? Those regions that thrive will be the ones that recognize that amenities are luxuries we can now afford. While we think of infrastructure as referring to roads, bridges, and buildings, the new infrastructure is broadband, interesting downtown cores, bike paths, river walks, lifelong learning, retirement homes, and playhouses. Our grandparents' luxuries have become our children's necessities.

This realization is a paradigm shift. While our planning is often solidly of the brick-and-mortar variety, those that demand a livable city want something a little more ethereal and elusive. The sense of community (again, servers serving servers) is experiencing a Renaissance. Professionals, glued to a maddening blue screen

all day, thirst for community, for a downtown core where people have been meeting people since the creation of civilization, and for a shared pride in the place they call home.

Ah, now the experience called Church Street in Burlington begins to make sense. For our kids, we need to recognize the infrastructure needs of our Servers Serving Servers. And we can celebrate a Court Street, Durkee Street, or Bridge Street in a

downtown like it was a hundred years ago.



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