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Pomp and Circumspect

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COMMENCEMENT speakers have long offered graduating seniors the same warm and gooey career advice: Do what you love.

And graduates have long responded the same way: They've listened carefully, nodded earnestly, and gone out and become accountants. No surprise. On every day except graduation day, young people are taught that their futures depend not on following their bliss, but on mastering dutiful (and less lovable) abilities like crunching numbers and following rules.

But this year is different. The students graduating this spring will operate in a labor market that increasingly confers an economic advantage on the activities that people do out of a sense of intrinsic satisfaction - designing cool things, telling stories and helping others. For the class of 2005, "Do what you love" is no longer a soft-hearted sentiment. It is also a hard-headed strategy.

What's going on?

Three powerful forces are converging to overturn the conventional logic of careers.

The first force is automation. Last century, machines replaced human muscle. This century, software is augmenting, if not replacing, the human brain's left hemisphere - the part that is linear, sequential and computer-like. Software can now do many tasks faster, cheaper and better than we can: processing claims, adding figures, searching data.

So accountants lose work to TurboTax. And lawyers lose work to legal Web sites that offer uncontested divorces for \$249 and articles of incorporation for the price of a pizza. To cope, we'll have to rely on what's harder to replicate in the 1's and 0's of computer code - inventiveness, empathy and seeing the big picture - which also happen to be the components of satisfying work.

The second force involves jobs going overseas. As certain types of work (answering phone calls, writing basic computer code, analyzing financial statements) migrate to places like India, graduates will have to draw on abilities that are less routine. These abilities (creating new products, crafting narratives, caring for others) are more difficult to outsource. But once mastered, they're typically more engaging than simply following the steps on a spec sheet or plugging numbers into a spreadsheet.

Finally, there's prosperity. This year's graduates have always lived in a country whose standard of living - deep into the middle class - is breathtaking. While the United States still has a disgraceful level of poverty, most Americans, in material terms, are doing pretty well.

For instance, the United States has more cars and trucks than licensed drivers. American families own such a surfeit of consumer goods that they've turned self-storage into a \$17 billion-a-year industry. In an overstocked marketplace, businesses can no longer crank out pallets of identical widgets. They must create customized, intriguing, even beautiful products, services and experiences. How do you do this? You need employees who possess not only technical ability but also a sense of curiosity, aesthetics and, yes, joyfulness.

In other words, to make it in the emerging economy, we will have to do things that software can't do faster and that overseas knowledge workers can't do more cheaply. In addition, what we produce must also satisfy the growing consumer demand for products and services infused with emotion, spirituality and artistry.

As the information age matures, eat-your-spinach skills are still necessary, but they are no longer sufficient. The abilities that matter more are turning out to be the abilities that are also fundamental sources of human gratification. And that's good news for many intrinsically motivated (but sometimes parentally discouraged) professions. Indeed, more Americans already work in art, entertainment and design than work as lawyers, accountants and auditors.

To be sure, this new labor market is not a land in which every person will be able to pursue a passion and instantly arrive at a fat paycheck. Still, we may finally be at the point where we can tell freshly minted graduates: Look, it's a rough world out there. There's only one way to survive. Do what you love.

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