

Imagining the Knowledge-Based Economy: Soon-to-be Labour Force Entrants Predict the Future of Work^{1,2}

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Since the 1950s, important changes have taken place in North American labour markets due, in large part, to the trend away from the production of goods toward a more knowledge-based economy that emphasizes the production, processing and distribution of information. Technological advances, especially recent developments in information and communication technologies, are also affecting the nature and social relations of work. Although the terms “knowledge-based economy” and “information society” are in frequent use in this context, little research has been undertaken to explore what these terms actually mean to members of the public, nor has there been any systematic exploration of how these concepts figure in the minds of young people who are preparing to enter the labour force.

In Canada, changing information and communication technologies have resulted in a “widespread need for knowledge and managerial expertise” and a concomitant decrease in the need for “data, services and goods workers” (Lavoie and Roy, 1998, p. 3). Forecasts of employment growth emphasize the importance of so-called “high-knowledge industries,” not only because employment in these industries is more resistant to cyclical downturns than others, but because they have contributed more to employment growth than medium- and low-knowledge industries, accounting for more than 40% of total job gains in Canada between 1986 and 1991 (Gera and Masse, 1996).

Projections of employment growth by Human Resources Development Canada and the United States’ Bureau of Labor Statistics suggest that those who plan careers in the information sector (as database administrators, computer engineers, or systems analysts, for example) or in health care services (as physical or occupational therapists, for example) should have little difficulty finding jobs. Indeed, these fields are predicted to be among the top ten fastest growing occupations in the next decade (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1998). Within the information sector, however, along with the employment “winners,” some occupations are expected to lose ground because of the “shift away from occupations which primarily require routinized handling of information toward occupations which required non-routine handling of information” (Martin, 1998, p. 1054). According to Martin, even though the information workforce continues to grow, and while opportunities are better in occupations involving non-routine information work, “growth is strongest among occupations that produce information” (p. 1064). Information workers categorized as “distributors,” including “public information disseminators” such as librarians and archivists, are expected to experience a slowdown in opportunities as technological change results in increasing routinization of their work. On the other hand, “producers,” including “private information service providers,” such as lawyers, and “science and technical workers,” such as