

2-1-2010

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Kenneth Spoto

Louisiana State University, kspoto@agctr.lsu.edu



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Recommended Citation

Spoto, K. (2010). A Review of *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century*. *The Journal of Extension*, 48(1), Article 29. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol48/iss1/29>

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February 2010
Volume 48 Number 1
Article Number 1TOT7

[Return to Current Issue](#)

A Review of The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century

Kenneth Spoto
County Agent
Youth Development
LSU AgCenter
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
kspoto@agctr.lsu.edu

Abstract: This article reviews a book that focuses on the leveling or elimination of some of the barriers to globalization. The author's thesis is covered in three particular contexts: identification of the 10 forces that flattened or are continuing to flatten the world; how societies, particularly the United States, businesses, organizations, and individuals will survive the flattening process; and a discussion of the constituencies, forces, and problems impeding the flattening process and how might we, as human beings, collaborate better to overcome them. The implications to Extension are many and will undoubtedly affect present and future Extension programming.

The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century, by Tom Friedman, is an easy-to-read and informative book explaining the effects of certain forces on the growth of globalization. The author's thesis should be relevant to the Extension professional because of its appeal for the promotion of imagination, innovation, and collaboration—coincidentally, hallmarks of Extension education programming.

The author covers his thesis, "the world is becoming flatter," in three particular contexts: identification of the 10 forces that flattened or are continuing to flatten the world; how societies, particularly the United States, businesses, organizations, and individuals will survive the flattening process; and a discussion on the constituencies, forces, and problems impeding the flattening process and how might we, as human beings, collaborate better to overcome them.

The 10 Forces

The first five of the 10 flattening forces the author identifies provided the first thrusts to an increase in globalization. These five forces are:

1. The fall of the Berlin wall and the rise of the Windows operating system—more people on the playing field and a system to help everyone play better;
2. A refinement of the worldwide Web and the development of Internet browsers—the computer and connectivity became more useful for millions;

3. The development of standard software that enabled better workflow within organizations and between organizations;
4. The collaboration of freelance programmers and engineers in chat room-like settings to produce shared software (e.g., Linux operating system, freeware, wikipedia);
5. Outsourcing Y2K—the collaboration of America and India on digitizing data in fear of losing large amounts with the advent of the year 2000; after Y2K, outsourcing from America to India exploded, and e-commerce grew.

The last five of the 10 flattening forces the author identifies are situations that have taken the flattening process further. These forces are:

1. Off shoring—China's joining the WTO in 2001 gave a huge boost to producing in China and other countries the same products that were produced in America, only with cheaper labor, lower taxes, subsidized energy, and lower health-care costs;
2. Supply chaining—collaborating horizontally among suppliers, retailers, and customers to create value; an example is the Walmart worldwide supply chain;
3. In sourcing—different from supply-chaining because it is "third party-managed logistics"; an example is UPS's work with clients to help them synchronize whole companies and their interactions with both customers and suppliers;
4. In forming—search engine companies, such as Google and Yahoo!, enabled individuals to build and deploy their own personal supply chains and become their own researcher, editor, and selector of entertainment in the privacy of their homes; and
5. The impact of digital, mobile, personal, and virtual gadgets that improve connectivity.

Survival in the Flattening World

To survive the "flattening" world, the author points out that Western nations, particularly the U.S., will have to transform their infrastructure and education systems. He notes there is a "quiet crisis" in this country where pressing fiscal, energy, science, and educational shortfalls need to be addressed by "leaders with vision." In education, he notes, there needs to be an emphasis on encouraging the study of liberal arts along with engineering, chemistry, and other sciences. To survive the flattening process, tomorrow's workers will need to be creative, well-rounded individuals.

Businesses and organizations that employ tomorrow's creative, well-rounded worker will cope with the flattening process "because society will offer an uninterrupted flow of ideas, diversity, concepts, and competitive edge." In terms of character, the successful company will recognize the growing number of empowered customers and, so, will need to "out behave" the competition.

Society will benefit from the flattened world; however, it will need to find or develop what the author terms, "the new middle class." This new class will include "the untouchables" and the "anchored," those professionals who will be so specialized they can never be outsourced or whose jobs are connected to a geographical location, e.g., researchers, doctors, nurses, chefs, etc. The author notes the U.S. needs a stronger and more supportive immigration system if it wants a national pool of people from which to hire.

Developing countries will also need to improve infrastructure, education, and governance to develop a framework for innovation and collaboration. Many will need to emulate the U.S. and make tolerance the norm, because, as the author notes, when tolerance is the norm, trust is bred, and trust is the foundation of innovation and entrepreneurship.

Forces and Problems Impeding the Flattening Process

The author points out that there is a large pool of potential talent in the world, principally from under developed countries, that will not be able to take part in or take advantage of the flattening process and that there will be too little time for help from reluctant or inadequate governments and from too few organizations and individuals to change the trend. Second, he explains that there are many who are disempowered—those who do not have the tools, skills, or infrastructure to participate for any length of time. Third, he maintains that there will be an increased global struggle for natural resources, resulting in "junking up, heating, and garbageing up, smoking up, and devouring up our little planet faster than at any time in history."

With the closeness that has resulted from globalization, the author notes that there are many who feel threatened, frustrated, and even humiliated. "Terrorism," the author relates, "is spawned by the poverty of dignity not of money, and humiliation is the most underestimated force in international and human relations." As far as large, conventional conflicts are concerned, the author states that "countries whose workers and industries are woven into a major global supply chain know that they cannot take an hour, a week, or a month off for war; disrupting industries and economies around the world would risk the loss of their place in that chain for a long time."

The author sums up his work, *The World Is Flat*, with an appeal for the continued promotion of imagination, innovation, and collaboration; these three, alone, may well enable the continued flattening of the world.

References

Friedman, Thomas L. (2007). *The world is flat: A brief history of the 21st century*. Picador. NY.

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