Brave New Work World

I have experienced a few dramatic moments, epiphanies even, when it became clear that the world I thought I was inhabiting was changing in remarkable ways. As a faculty member, I once cancelled class because I was giving a paper at a national conference. I assumed I would be a hero. In my experience at that time, students loved nothing more than a day to skip class and catch up on all the work I was assigning. Instead, one of my working adult students called me up to read me the riot act. The conversation started with “I paid good money for this class” and went downhill from there. In this single moment, I realized the academy was heading into some decidedly uncharted waters.

When it comes to the brave new work world, I’ll borrow the epiphany of Carolyn O’Hara, managing editor of *The Week.* She explains that she was working with a friend’s personal assistant, Amy, and exchanged several e-mails to handle the logistics for a meeting. O’Hara was impressed with Amy: “She was efficient and gracious, considerate of my schedule constraints, and so polite in her responses that, with the meeting arranged, I began typing up a brief thank-you.” It was then that O’Hara noticed Amy’s e-mail signature and realized that she had been working with a digital assistant powered by artificial intelligence. As O’Hara wrote: “Amy wasn’t actually human. She was an algorithm. I’d been corresponding with a machine all along and hadn’t even realized it.” O’Hara predicts that if this hasn’t happened to you by now, it’s going to soon.

This issue of *EDUCAUSE Review* is, in many ways, a collection of epiphanies, insights, predictions, and educated prognostications not only about the future of work but also about the interconnected relationship between the academy and careers. Whether you consider that relationship to be symbiotic, reciprocal, mutualistic, or something less interdependent, the articles that follow offer important commentary on a topic that is in the news and on our minds regularly.

In “Thinking about the Future of Work to Make Better Decisions about Learning Today,” the futurist and social scientist Marina Gorbis explores, with the benefit of decades of previous forecasting work, what she calls “deeper transformations.” Focusing on four clusters of technology—smart machines, coordination economies, immersive collaboration, and the maker mindset—she takes the provocative position that Marshall McLuhan got it right: “We shape our tools and afterwards our tools shape us.” Gorbis offers concrete examples of change fully under way, whether Japanese robots building other robots or Internet-connected dinosaur toys designed to grow with the children for whom they are purchased (adaptive playing?). Jobs are being redefined, transformed, and sometimes “eaten” by new technologies or moved to the cloud. For example, when it comes to coordination economies like Uber, Gorbis points out that employees are changing along with the jobs, moving from “stable 9-to-5 jobs” to “a stitching together of various tasks performed in flexible niches of time.” Jobs are becoming less about large tasks and more about micro-tasks or micro-contributions. Gorbis hints at the future promise of bitcoin to track knowledge acquisition and points to several ways that new technologies offer alternatives to traditional degrees, from badging to GitHub to emerging startups such as Degreed, whose mission is to “jailbreak the degree.”

Jamie Merisotis, president and CEO of the Lumina Foundation, continues this conversation in “Credentials Reform: How Technology and the Changing Needs of the Workforce Will Create the Higher Education System of the Future.” Merisotis takes a deep dive into what he calls “the powerful shift” that has taken place in the last few decades in the field of postsecondary credentialing. Whereas too often we see product development/hype in the driver’s seat, Merisotis refreshingly suggests that the needs of students and employees are “unleashing the power of technology.” His exploration of transformation examines the growth in credentials serving as alternatives to degrees, specifically suggesting that campus IT leaders have

(continued on page 6)
“a unique opportunity to influence this transformation.” Acknowledging that the transformation of the credentialing ecosystem will take years to accomplish, he observes that key changes are already evident. The system he envisions is most clearly expressed in the Connecting Credentials platform. Co-sponsored by the Lumina Foundation and over 90 others, including EDUCAUSE, this effort aspires to develop a universal taxonomy that will connect all kinds of credentials. These better-connected credentials, along with common definitions and a shared language for understanding, extend Merisotis’s vision and suggest “a digital passport to showcase learning and accomplishments throughout a lifetime.”

Who is earning the nontraditional credentials discussed by Merisotis, and who is working in the nontraditional jobs outlined by Gorbis? Very likely, they span the generations, just as they do in the higher education IT workforce. Eden Dahlstrom, chief research officer for the Data, Research, and Analytics (DRA) unit at EDUCAUSE, uses information from the latest EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research (ECAR) workforce study as a lens for viewing the changes ahead. In “Appreciating a Multigenerational Higher Education IT workforce,” Dahlstrom explores the generational differences as the youngest professionals begin to enter higher education IT professions in force. She acknowledges that the “oversimplified generalization of traits” has limits, but she says such generalizations also offer insights that allow us to “categorize an otherwise complex world.” As Dahlstrom explains, an understanding by Gen Xers and Boomers of the next generation—and vice versa—“will help colleges and universities maintain business continuity during the generational transition.” (Indeed, to ensure that EDUCAUSE members will benefit from the unique perspective of emerging leaders, we recently created our own Young Professionals Advisory Council: http://www.educause.edu/educause-young-professionals-advisory-council.)

(continued on page 8)
By the time you finish reading Dahlstrom’s article, you will no doubt have realized that in this issue of *EDUCAUSE Review*, every single keyword in this conversation means something a little different from what it meant a few years ago. Student demographics, the nature of employment, how we measure learning, the workforce—so much has changed. And more change is coming. One of my favorite futurist insights is the prediction that “the illiterates of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and r elearn.” Another epiphany! With all the jar ring, tectonic transformations in higher education and the workplace, the crucial competency that students will need in order to succeed in the brave new work world is not new at all: it is the age-old ability to change with change.

**Notes**

2. This quote is often incorrectly attributed to Alvin Toffler. In fact, Toffler quoted Professor Herbert Gerjuoy, who stated: “Tomorrow’s illiterate will not be the man who can’t read; he will be the man who has not learned how to learn.” *Future Shock* (1970)