

*"If a man empties his purse into his head, no one can take it away from him. An investment of knowledge always pays the best interest."*

Benjamin Franklin

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# Education Works!

## Maine Career Ladder Missing Rungs

By Tom Broussard

Job growth is up. Unemployment is down. Businesses across the state report critical labor shortages. Computer programmer shortages reported in Portland. Skilled machinist shortages reported statewide.

Even lifeguards are in short supply at the beaches. Maine has created a record number of new jobs in the last two years and many of them are still going unfilled.

With so many jobs available why do Maine citizens continue to leave the state to find work? How does one reconcile record-setting job growth with continued population loss? Why isn't Maine an employee's paradise?

There are lots of jobs and not enough people to fill them. Isn't this the definition of an employee market?

### What kinds of jobs are being created?

The hottest job growth in Maine has been in the service sector. We have successfully attracted the call center industry, which hardly existed here five years ago. Today it employs thousands of people. While growth has slowed, it is still growing. Companies such as MBNA, L.L. Bean, ICT, Telemark, Mediphis, DMI, EnvisioNet and others have

set up or expanded operations in Maine.

This should be good news for Maine and it is in lots of ways. But it comes at a price.

### Job creation and job destruction.

The global marketplace dictates that labor-intensive work be accomplished where the cost of labor is cheapest. As a result, Maine has lost much of its labor-intensive industries to other countries.

Shipbuilding, manufacturing, fishing, farming, forest products, paper textiles, and leather products are examples of Maine industries affected by globalization.

So, while Maine leads the nation in job growth, most of the positions created have been low-skilled, low-wage positions

while most of the jobs lost have been high-skilled, high-wage traditional industry positions.

### What kind of jobs are we educating our students for?

Maine is a national leader in education. We have one of the highest high school completion rates in the country.

Alternatively, we have one of the lowest rates of college completion. As a result there has been a significant push towards college. So much so that high schools are often evaluated based on their college acceptance rates; the higher the acceptance rate the "better" the school.

### The Brain Drain

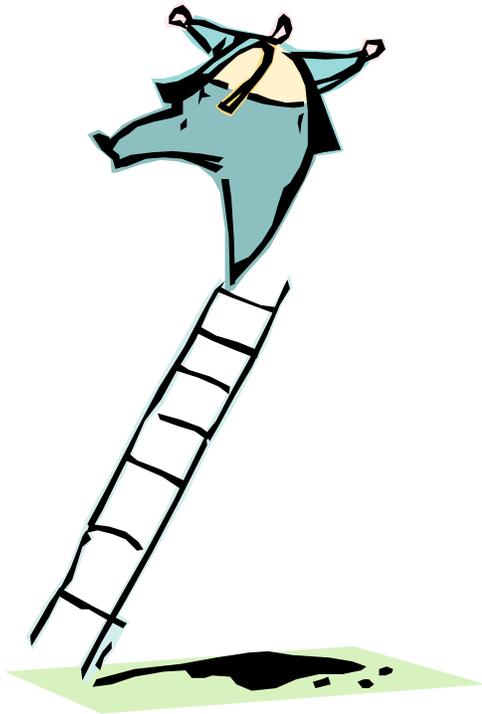
College graduates however find a shortage of good paying, entry-level positions with benefits in Maine. These are the



growth positions leading to higher level assignments. These are the first rungs on their career ladder. All dressed up and nowhere to go, college graduates leave or do not return to Maine after college “away.”

**The Service Sector has been good to Maine**

Call centers have been called the “13<sup>th</sup> grade” because of the role they play in



providing communications skills, computer skills and work/life skills to workers in transition who are in need of precisely those skills. They certainly can be considered good first jobs for high school graduates.

However, successful graduates of the “13<sup>th</sup> grade” also need access to jobs that will offer them additional opportunities to move up the ladder. But like their college-going counterparts, those rungs are missing for them too.

**Mismatched efforts**

Neither the jobs we are creating nor the jobs we are losing require a college degree. Ironically, the high paying manufacturing jobs we are losing require skills but not a lot of formal

education. The low paying service jobs we are gaining require a different set of skills but not a lot of formal education either.

The net result of this kind of churn in employment is that those with less education simply move down the pay scale.

**Summary**

Maine has enough low paying service jobs.

The truth is there are crucial rungs missing in Maine’s career ladder in every setting and every industry.

In the absence of sufficient mid-level jobs, many Maine citizens will continue to jump to another ladder – possibly in another state – to get the skills and incomes necessary to establish their careers and their families.

Now we need a critical mass of mid-level jobs of all kinds paying good salaries with benefits for college and *high school* grads alike and effective education for all is the key.

