

B O O K R E V I E W

What's in *The Rise of the Creative Class* for Technical Communicators?

Jean Richardson, Consultant, BJR Communications

Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* has taken the US economic development industry by storm. This professor of Regional Economic Development at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, entered the discussion of "what now?" and "what next?" as the high-tech stock market was making its rough ride to the bottom and America was reconsidering its deconstruction of the military/industrial complex in favor of consumer products. His fresh writing style and data-driven analysis appeal both to the armchair economist and the popular culture watcher.

His thesis? There is a significant contingent in the 18 to 35-year-old demographic that is quietly having a large impact on the future of the development of products and ideas in this country, and their potential to shape our culture is just beginning to be revealed. If properly identified as one of our richest natural resources and employed in the context of economic recovery, this resource, which is flocking to certain locales throughout the country, has the vitality and promise we are looking for in the current recession.

Why is recognizing this contingent important to managers of knowledge generation and management functions? Because the creative class that Florida describes is largely composed of people in these functions. He looks at how their values, level of self-direction, portability, and social mores impact attracting, retaining, and applying their talents from a regional standpoint. He also discusses how their lifestyles and work styles coalesce and how they are motivated—largely by their curiosity and opportunities to express their creativity. His analysis of their sometimes surprisingly conservative values, preference for loosely coupled relationships, and focus on place is peppered with numerous insights into working with and motivating these valuable human resources.

In summary, this 404-page book, with index, covers the topic in four parts and 15 chapters. Appendices beginning on page 327 show the cities and various indices he uses in evaluating certain locations' attractions for this class of worker.

PART ONE: THE CREATIVE AGE

These three chapters provide the obligatory, and somewhat scholarly, backward glance to give context for the rest of the discussion. This is great reading if you are interested in economic and social history, as I am. In Chapter Four, Florida explains his working definition of "creative class" and how it relates to similar analyses of work culture by other scholars:

The rise of the Creative Economy has had a profound effect on the sorting of people into social groups or classes. Others have speculated over the years on the rise of new classes in the advanced industrial economies. During the 1960s, Peter Drucker and Fritz Machlup described the growing role and importance of the new group of workers they dubbed "knowledge workers." Writing in the 1970s, Daniel Bell pointed to a new, more meritocratic class structure of scientists, engineers, managers, and administrators brought on by the shift from a manufacturing to a "postindustrial" economy. The sociologist Erik Olin Wright has written for decades about the rise of what he called a new "professional-managerial" class. Robert Reich more recently advanced the term "symbolic analysts" to describe the members of the workforce who manipulate ideas and symbols. All of these observers caught economic aspects of the emerging class structure that I describe here. (p. 67)

PART TWO: WORK

This section begins to cover the social and cultural differences between the creative class, their parents, and their peers—including what

Jean Richardson
Consultant
BJR Communications

jean@bjrcom.com
www.bjrcom.com

Jean Richardson is a communication consultant in private practice. She focuses on hardware, software, and Web-development. She is a past president of the Willamette Valley Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication in Portland, Oregon, as well as a Better Business Bureau Arbitrator, and a Multnomah County Court Mediator. With her associate, Lisa Burk, she trains other technical professionals on conflict management skills.

may be a few surprises. In a section on managing creativity, Florida discusses human resource management strategies as they have emerged in high-tech companies. Then, he makes an interesting observation:

And these practices offered one great efficiency to firms—and one incredible advantage to capitalism—which ultimately assured their further diffusion. They enabled firms and the economy as a whole to capture the creative talents of people who would have been considered oddballs, eccentrics or worse during the high period of the organizational age. Richard Lloyd quotes the founder of one of the Chicago high-tech firms studied as saying: “Lots of people who fell between the cracks in another generation and who were more marginalized are [now] highly employable and catered to by businesses that tend to be flexible with their lifestyles and lifecycles.” (p. 140)

And later, he makes some observations about managing creativity in high-tech companies that may not surprise you:

We selected an edgy high-tech company as the venue for our workshop and invited two of their top executives to join in the discussion.... As we got further into it, the two high-tech executives began to chime in with their views, which essentially amounted to a high-tech version of “management by stress”—working people as long and as hard as they could stand. It quickly became clear to the group that these two did not have the foggiest idea of how to motivate or even treat creative people, let alone build an effective and enduring organizational culture. (p. 142)

PART THREE: LIFE AND LEISURE

In section three, composed of two chapters “The Experiential Life” and “The Big Morph (a Rant),” Florida goes deeper into how lifestyle and work intersect in the creative economy. In the first chapter, Florida describes the kind of experientially rich communities and workplaces members of the creative class tend to choose. In the second chapter, Florida discusses the tension between the Protestant work ethic and the bohemian ethic that the creative class successfully embodies. While this chapter is, indeed, a rant, it is also a good read:

What happened instead was neither sixties nor eighties, neither bourgeois nor bohemian, but the opening of a path to something new. The great cultural legacy of the sixties, as it turned out, was not Woodstock after all, but something that had evolved at the other end of the continent. It was Silicon Valley. This place in the very heart of the San Francisco Bay area became the proving ground for the new ethos of creativity. If work could be made more aesthetic and experiential; if it could be spiritual and “useful” in the poetic sense rather than in the duty-bound sense; if the organizational strictures and rigidity of the old system could be transcended; if bohemian values like individuality—which also happens to be a tried-and-true all-American value—could be brought to the workplace, then we could move beyond the old categories. (p. 202)

It is worthwhile to note here that Florida spends basically no time looking at how this idealism contributed to the rise and fall of the dot-bombs.

PART FOUR: COMMUNITY

In this section, Florida talks about the importance of place to this demographic—and to creative work—and he talks about how a spirit of tolerance acts almost as a cradle for creativity. He discusses creative class members’ preference for loosely coupled interpersonal commitments rather than the tightly coupled group affiliations of the previous generations’ sense of social capital and some of the implications of this change. This chapter may be the most data-based in the book because he classifies hundreds of communities into Classic Social Capital Communities, Organizational Age Communities, Nerdistans, and Creative Centers. Odds are, if you are living in a community of any size, you’ll find your community ranked in the related appendix. Even Yakima, Washington, comes into the discussion.

In an industry where distributed and virtual teams are increasingly the norm, this focus on place is particularly interesting. Many people have very strong feelings about the way computer-mediated communication impacts working relationships. In the section called “The World of Weak Ties,” Florida states, “Practically all of us have at least a few such relationships. According to sociologists who study networks, most people have and can

manage between five and ten strong-tie relationships.” But, he counters, “weak ties are often more important... research on social networks has shown that weak ties are the key mechanism for mobilizing resources, ideas, and information, whether for finding a job, solving a problem, launching a new product, or establishing a new enterprise. A key reason that weak ties are important is that we can manage many more of them.” (p. 276—277) This strategy of maintaining many weak ties to facilitate creative connection is supported by tools like contact databases, email, automatic task reminder systems, and various remote communication and collaboration technologies.

WHAT IF YOU'RE NOT (CHRONOLOGICALLY) A KID ANYMORE?

As the Biography page on Florida's site at CMU states, “He is widely regarded as one of the most influential academics on the shift to the new, knowledge economy and has spearheaded national debates on industrial competitiveness, high-technology industries, and the globalization of industry.” What about those of us over 35? While Florida concentrates on this demographic through most of the book, the last chapter, “The Creative Class Grows Up,” focuses on what needs to be done to ensure that the creative class—the knowledge workers you may be managing even now—is properly fostered in the US. Generally, building wisdom seems to take time, though the passage of time is far from a guarantee of the development of wisdom. The development of wisdom requires *paying attention*, something that Florida believes this class of workers has not done well.

Vast numbers of Creative Class people are concerned mainly with building their resumes, building their bodies and acquiring the status kit of our age: a stylishly renovated home with a Sub-Zero refrigerator, Viking stove and an SUV in the drive. They naively assume that if they take care of their own business, the rest of the world will take care of itself and continue to provide the environment they need to prosper. (p. 316)

Further, true to his creative class values, he goes on to warn about emerging class divides.

America is far from a unified society.... The worsening divides in our society are not merely a problem of social equity; they are *economically inefficient* for the nation as a whole.... Why, then, should promoting creativity everywhere be a main theme of our policies and our lives? Why not focus on promoting some attribute that seems to be more universally positive and beneficial—say, spiritual growth, or civility? Wouldn't that, over the long run, make us better people who can more wisely direct the creative impulse that flows so naturally? My answer is that of course, we should cultivate both of those virtues. But neither of them is an economic force that increases the resources with which we may do good in the world. Creativity is. (p. 320—325)

Managers of knowledge workers in the current economy, particularly managers of those workers in high-tech companies, have seen their ranks drastically thinned. This downsizing is ironic in the face of the compelling argument that Florida details in this book. But it is not surprising when this book is read contemplatively.

We knowledge workers, as a class, don't know who we are. And those of us who identify primarily as writers have never really been able to characterize our value to corporate America. Wherever there is a successful organization, though, there are writers—perhaps they go by other titles, but they are there. Preoccupied by our bohemian

druthers, apologetic for our lack of eloquence in the face of bean counting skepticism about our value, we bow and scrape by, often bowing out the door when the going gets tough for the organization—never knowing that, increasingly, we have spun the thread and woven the cloth the corporation has made its expensive suit from.

I think Florida would point out downsizing writers as a critical lapse in business sense—on our part, as much as the corporation's. □

REFERENCE

The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life
Richard Florida
Basic Books
2002, New York, NY
ISBN: 0465024769

“...those of us who identify primarily as writers have never really been able to characterize our value to corporate America.”