

Message from the Secretary of Labor

The American workforce has gone through many changes in the last century, none more striking than the way we work. At the beginning of the previous century, wages were low, and the Nation did not even measure unemployment. Today, BLS measures almost every aspect of the American labor force. The 20th century was, as Ben Wattenberg put it, “The First Measured Century.”

This volume looks at the information we now know through these new measurements, examining three of the major 20th century changes in the compilation of labor statistics. The first chapter focuses on important changes to the composition of the American population and workforce, as enormous waves of immigration during the last century both augmented the labor force and challenged mechanisms of the labor market. Chapter 2 examines the evolution of compensation practices over the course of the 20th century, as workers’ compensation packages evolved from a simple pay envelope at the end of the week to a complex set of cash payments and benefits. The final chapter of this report describes some of the efforts to measure structural changes that affected the economy, as industries and occupations changed throughout the century.

Thanks in part to these new measuring tools, the 20th century has been one of the most productive and dynamic centuries ever. But the 21st century promises to be even more exciting and enterprising for the American workforce. With all of the changes to come, America’s 21st century workforce needs to do more than simply adjust to the new economy. To succeed in the 21st century, our Nation must be prepared to *embrace* the changes in our economy—in how we work, where we work, and how we balance our professional and family lives.

I believe that the Department of Labor should lead the way in anticipating and reacting to changes, thus helping all workers to have as fulfilling and financially rewarding careers as they aspire to have. To this end, we have created a new Office of the 21st Century Workforce. The office’s mission is to provide all American workers with the opportunity to equip themselves with the tools necessary to succeed in their careers and in whatever field they choose in this new and dynamic global economy.

That does not mean we should change everything. We still need to protect workers’ safety and health, retirement security, and equal access to jobs and promotions. But we also need to be open to new and better ways to achieve those goals, taking into account how Americans actually work today.

I want us to focus as a Department on three issues that will determine our Nation’s economic strength in this century, and shape the quality of life for America’s working families:

The skills gap. Our economy is making an unprecedented transition into high-skilled, information-based industries. This has created a disconnect between the jobs that are being created and the current skills of many workers.

Our demographic destiny. In just a few decades, we will have a growing class of retirees and a shrinking workforce. In addition, there will be an increasingly diverse group of Americans entering the workforce, bringing with them the need for truly new ways of organizing and managing work.

The future of the American workplace. Anyone can tell you that this is not our parents' economy. The average 34-year-old has already worked for nine different companies in his or her brief career. Around 10 million people work away from their corporate office at least 3 days a month. As people sort out the new priorities of financial needs and family life, they all face the same new concerns: A career move that leaves behind health care coverage; abandoning pension benefits before they are vested; renegotiating with each new employer the balance between work and home.

In this new century, BLS will continue to provide us the tools needed to face these challenges. With enlightened leadership, the private, public, and nonprofit sectors, working together, can develop innovative solutions to ever-more-complex labor market problems. Leadership will make us a nation open to the talents of all our people—including those who have been left out of the workforce until now. Ultimately, informed leadership will make our training programs effective “venture capital” for the 21st century workforce.

ELAINE L. CHAO
Secretary of Labor