

SUNDAY MONEY

OFF THE SHELF

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The American Worker, From All Sides Now

WANT to know just how much the work force around you is changing? Well, more than a dozen books on the subject are scheduled to be published by year's end — many of them dealing with one group or another that is being reshaped.

The transformation is so pervasive that the authors — rightly, for the most part — think they need upward of 300 pages to explain how these groups will be affected.

The best of these books raises the most intriguing question: Are companies ready to deal with the loss of intellectual capital that comes from workers' retirement?

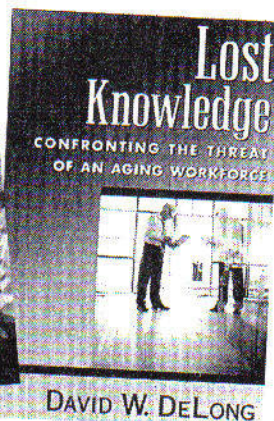
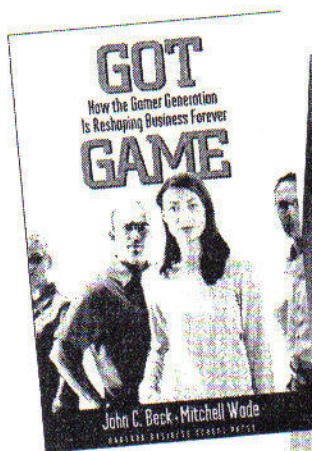
Not really, says David W. DeLong in "Lost Knowledge: Confronting the Threat of an Aging Workforce" (Oxford University Press, \$24.95). That is especially troubling because the baby boomers — the largest generation ever to work — have already started to retire, adds Mr. DeLong, a research fellow at the AgeLab of M.I.T. and an adjunct professor at Babson College.

Because the oldest boomers are just 58, of course, the number of those who have left the work force is still small. But the trickle will soon turn to a flood, and most companies are not prepared for the fact that much of what those workers know — knowledge that has never been captured anywhere — will be walking out the door with them.

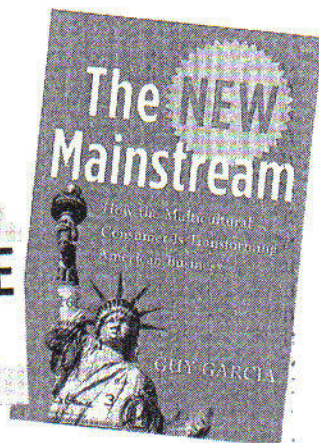
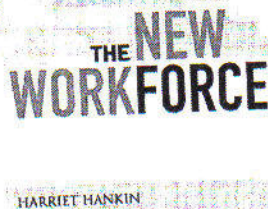
Of course, knowledge disappearance has been a problem throughout time. Just think of the lost library of Alexandria in Egypt, or the fact that no one can recall how Antonio Stradivari made violins.

But the problem is more severe today, Mr. DeLong says, because the knowledge we are about to lose is more complex, abstract and costly to recreate. Particularly vulnerable, he says, are the Defense Department, where a significant number of civilian workers are scheduled to retire by 2008, and the oil and gas industry, which expects to lose 60 percent of its veteran employees by 2010.

To help the country cope, he proposes multiple solutions, like staggering retirements and formally debriefing employees when they retire.



Five Sweeping Trends That Will Shape Your Company's Future



Mr. DeLong says the emphasis should be on capturing the information that is most important to a company's strategic objectives. Obvious as that may seem, the natural tendency is for individual departments, like marketing, to retain information that is most important to them, regardless of whether it strengthens the company's overall competitive position.

Presumably, most of the workers who would benefit from this retained knowledge are part of what John C. Beck and Mitchell Wade refer to as "the gamer generation." That means basically everyone under 40.

In "Got Game: How the Gamer Generation Is Reshaping Business Forever" (Harvard Business School Press, \$27.50), they argue that this group has been influenced to a remarkable degree by all the video games they have played. As a result, the authors contend, these people are more creative, having figured out how to play the games — and more competitive, because the object of all those games is to win. They are also, of course, comfortable using technology.

Some of those on the other side of the "gaming gap" may not be con-

vinced of the authors' conclusions, but the book's premise is fun.

Guy Garcia, a former staff writer at Time magazine who also worked on the development of AOL Latin America, looks at the changing demographics from the other side of the

business equation: how will these shifts affect what people buy?

Mr. Garcia doesn't supply specific answers in his book, "The New Mainstream: How the Multicultural Consumer Is Transforming American Business" (HarperCollins, \$24.95). But he relentlessly makes the case that the change, already under way, will intensify, and that companies need to spend even more time trying to understand the

needs of all consumers.

As Mr. Garcia points out, blacks, Hispanics and Asians already make up more than one-fourth of the United States population. By 2050, Mr. Garcia adds, "non-Anglos will have grown to 47 percent" of the total.

The changing population has been affecting the marketplace for many years — and in many specific ways. Salsa, for example, overtook ketchup as the nation's most popular condiment 13 years ago.

"The buying power of Latinos

alone is growing at a compound rate of 8.7 percent, almost double that of non-Hispanics," he writes, giving just one quick reason that companies will need to further reshape their selling strategies to accommodate a changing marketplace.

SEVERAL other factors will affect employers in coming years, says Harriet Hankin, a benefits consultant, in her book, "The New Workforce: Five Sweeping Trends That Will Shape Your Company's Future" (Amacom, \$27.95).

She says that there will be as many as five generations working side by side — each with different wants, needs and expectations. That means corporate benefits will need to change to reflect not only same-sex households, but also the need for elder care, and she expects workers to start insisting more that their employers be trustworthy and believe in something more than making money.

All of this is a far cry from the work force depicted in the 1950's television series "Father Knows Best," in which the (white) father went to work and his (white) wife stayed home with their three children.

In fact, it would be interesting to know what percentage of the work force today would even understand a reference to "Father Knows Best," let alone the world it represented. □

New generational tides, going out and coming in, and what they mean for business.