

An opportunity to be creative

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In addressing the current economic crisis, governments should focus on the long term, not demands for quick fixes.

That is the powerful underlying message in this week's report, *Ontario in the Creative Age*, jointly authored by Roger Martin, dean of the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, and urban guru Richard Florida. "We can't lose the opportunity that the crisis gives us," said Florida at a breakfast meeting in Toronto yesterday.

"Our economy is shifting away from jobs based largely on physical skills or repetitive tasks to ones that require analytical skills and judgment," says the report. And rather than resisting this change, we should be speeding it along "to ensure our future prosperity."

The report advocates making Ontario "the world's first jurisdiction where creativity-oriented occupations account for half of all jobs." (Currently, about 30 per cent of jobs in the province fall under that category.)

This is a laudable goal. But how do we get there?

Governments alone can't do it, says the report. Businesses have a responsibility to invest more in making their employees more creative.

As an example, the report cites Four Seasons, the Toronto-based hotel chain, whose employees are encouraged to take initiative. "The hotels have no customer service department, for instance. Instead, everyone – from dishwasher to general manager – is responsible for catering to the guests' needs."

But governments also have a major role to play, the report says, by investing heavily in education (not just post-secondary, but also early childhood), skills training (particularly for new Canadians), and infrastructure (including subway lines and high-speed rail). "We spend too much unproductive time sitting in cars, buses, subways and trains," says the report.

Much of this is in line with the thinking of the man who commissioned the report, Premier Dalton McGuinty. Indeed, in a speech earlier this week, McGuinty seemed to be channelling Martin and Florida as he called on business to invest more in their employees and suggested his government would spend more on post-secondary education. "The new

global economy is going to favour the places that are fast, innovative and exciting," remarked McGuinty. "That's the Ontario I envision."

But previous premiers have had similar visions, only to be distracted by more immediate demands. Under pressure himself for short-term solutions to the economic crisis, McGuinty will find it difficult to keep his government focused on the future. The first clues to his ability to juggle these short- and long-term challenges should come in about a month in the provincial budget.