

If Only We'd Known...

Jim Golembeski, Upward Mobility Signals Team

As we prepare for Greater Green Bay's fourth annual celebration of World Futures Day, I can't help but reflect on how things were in northeast Wisconsin 25 years ago—if we'd only known then what we know now! But we did not, and we paid a huge price.

At that time I was Executive Director of Bay Area Workforce Development Board with a mission to provide reemployment and training services to workers in the face of company closings and large layoffs. From 2001 to 2005 I stood (as I like to put it) in front of large groups of middle-aged, gravitationally challenged men who had lost their family-supporting jobs. There were thousands of such workers during those years. My poster child is always Mirro Aluminum in Manitowoc where over 1300 men and women were displaced. The town of Suring was devastated at the closing of Evenflo at which half the town was employed. Emerson Motors, Bird's Eye Foods, Palmer Johnson, Tecumseh Motors—all those names now recall the dark days of closing businesses and unemployment.

We should have seen it all coming. The “signals,” as we call them in our work at Envision, were definitely there. The world was changing around us, but we thought we could go on as we always had. We did not pay attention to the signals.

For example, Fort Howard Paper had been a mainstay in Green Bay for 78 years beginning in 1919. In 1997 Fort Howard merged with James River Paper in Virginia and became Fort James. Company leadership left town. Only three years later, Georgia-Pacific purchased Fort James and moved company headquarters to Atlanta. In 2005, GP was purchased by the Koch brothers and turned into a privately held company. Since then, the Koch family has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in new technology at that facility. That means fewer people are producing twice as much paper as before. All that was quite a shock after 78 years of stability. There were huge changes happening to our paper industry.

The signals were there: technological development with digitization and the Internet was the big one. But we also should have seen the emergence of the European Union and the entry of China and Russia into the global economy. No one was looking at signals. Until 2005, Lakeshore Technical College did not have a welding program!

We did some amazing things back then that have yielded excellent results for our community. We created The NEW North, NEW Manufacturing Alliance, NEW North Digital Alliance, and more recent programs like Tech Spark. Our education systems really stepped up and innovated, but it was all REACTIVE! Too many people were traumatized during that difficult transition. I remember their faces.

World Futures Day is intended to be PROACTIVE. We all know that our world is changing around us at a faster pace than ever from the emergence of AI and its application, to climate change, to

global economic realignment. Our featured speaker this year, Jonathan Brill, has worked extensively in the business sector to help companies such as Hewlett Packard adapt and thrive. His new book, *Rogue Waves*, is a blueprint for anticipating disruption; we should pay attention.

Hopefully, with the work of Envision, and meaningful community involvement in World Futures Day, we can start to work effectively for a *preferred* future. Our community needs to pay attention to the signals this time and I recommend World Futures Day on February 2, 2025 as the place to do that.