

EDITORIAL

THE FLATTENING OF THE WORLD



first part of
the title of
Thomas L.

Friedman's latest book, *The World Is Flat*, succinctly identifies what is to follow.¹ This renown columnist and author presents his thesis: we have come to the next era of a world wide trend that increasingly has fostered a "leveling of the playing field, or in Friedman's term, *globalization*. Historically, he proposes this trend as having occurred during three eras.

The first began with Columbus, who opened trade between the New and the Old Worlds. This caused the initial shrinking of the world from a size large, to a size medium. The degree to which one's country could be involved and benefit from this smaller size depended on.....*how much brawn-how much muscle, how much horsepower, wind power, or, later, steam power-your country had and how creatively you could deploy it.*¹ (p50) This initial globalization lasted from 1492 until 1800.

Friedman identifies the time of the second era as from 1800 until the last years of the 20th Century. He now characterizes the world as shrinking from medium to small. Initially, the major innovations were the formation of multinational companies and the Industrial Revolution. Although it was interrupted somewhat by the Great Depression of the 1930's and two World Wars, it was fueled by the continual development of cost and time efficient methods of transportation and communication. These would include the development of railroads, air travel, and the telegraph, tele-

phone, the personal computer and satellites respectively.

The present era is the *Flattener*. Friedman treats this time with significantly more detail than the previous two. He identifies the *Ten Forces That Flattened The World*. To me, the most significant include: the breakdown of the Berlin Wall; going from a PC-based computing platform to an Internet based platform, particularly when Netscape went public; the development of software that enables more direct and extensive communication. He sums this up:

*When you add this unprecedented new level of people-to-people communication to all these Web-based application-to-application work flow programs, you end up with a whole new global platform for multiple forms of collaboration.*¹ (p80)

A prime example of these multiple forms of collaboration include outsourcing various aspects of commerce to entities that can perform particular tasks in a more efficient and cost effective manner than the usual method. I propose that the remaining forces are direct consequences of above three.

However, it becomes evident that these innovations are not without a cost. For example, a number of previously home based American customer services have been outsourced. If you call your phone company or Internet provider, there is a good chance that you'll be talking to someone in India, China, or as I recently found, South Africa. This has given the companies an apparently cost effective manner to provide these services. The cost is three fold. First, ex-

tensive training in language and interpersonal skills is required. Secondly, this decentralization has the potential to compromise customer service, and lastly is the loss of jobs in the United States.

Friedman's model encompasses the world, but it can be readily applied to many of society's entities. This application provides an interesting perspective to the flattening that has occurred in American optometry, vis a vis other health care professions.

Optometry can be considered to have had its international roots even before Friedman's first era, because spectacles were first used in the 13th Century. It continued to develop during the early part of the second era by virtue of technological advances in the optical and refractive aspects. Nevertheless, it remained a largely unregulated craft; as such the disparity between optometry and the other mainstream health care

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