

April 2006

The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Globalized World in the 21st Century

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Recommended Citation

Lalchandani, Sonia (2006) "The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Globalized World in the 21st Century," *Management Dynamics*: Vol. 6: No. 1, Article 8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57198/2583-4932.1220>

Available at: <https://managementdynamics.researchcommons.org/journal/vol6/iss1/8>

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THE WORLD IS FLAT
A brief history of the globalized world in the 21st century
by
Thomas L. Friedman
Allen Lane (Penguin)
Pages 488 Special Price \$13.50

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As far back as we can remember, the earth has been spherical. Paradoxically, it now appears that the world has “flattened”. This is due to certain events which have taken shape over the past couple of decades. The consequent transition demands adaption not only from individuals and corporates but also society and nations as a whole. This is precisely the theme of Thomas L. Friedman's latest book “The World is Flat”. If one wants to learn about globalization right from scratch, from its cradle to the present adolescent age, then Friedman's book is the right choice.

The book has its genesis in the conversation of the author with the CEO of Infosys, Nandan Nilekani. The author's visit to Bangalore proved to be an eye-opener for him when he realized the breadth and width of the spread of globalization. He then started out on a journey to find the forces that have “flattened” the world i.e. leveling of the global competitive field.

His observations revealed that there have been ten broad “flatteners”. The first one was the fall of the Berlin Wall heralding the triumph of market economies over command economies. This disintegration of the wall and simultaneous popularity of “windows” (Microsoft Windows) led to the leveling of the world and increase in market size.

The next flattener was the rise of an internet browser given by Netscape leading to connecting all parts of the world. Friedman also

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attributes much importance to the open source softwares such as Linux that have humbled the software giants Microsoft and IBM. The author also feels that outsourcing, insourcing, offshoring and supply-chaining have shrunk the whole world. A corporate in one part of the world is not averse to collaborate with another corporate in the other part of the world so as to become bigger and more efficient.

The growth of knowledge economies and the urge of individuals to keep themselves “in-formed” have also been instrumental in weaving the world together. Lastly, various technological developments have acted as “steroids” in flattening the world. Thus, “flattening of the world means that we are connecting all knowledge centres on the planet together into a single global network, which if politics and terrorism do not get in the way could usher in an amazing era of prosperity and innovation.”

In the next part of the book, Friedman has tried to study and also predict the implications of globalization. His book is sprinkled with words of caution to the “developed world” (read “America”). If this part of the world wants to benefit from the flattening then it needs to shed off its complacency and adopt reforms which are not only far-sighted but also foresighted. To his own daughters he wants to advice, “girls, finish your homework, - people in China and India are starving for your jobs”. The “developing world” also needs to ‘introspect’ so as to reap maximum benefit from globalization.

The author concludes by beckoning individuals, leaders and corporates to prepare themselves for the inevitable flattening of the world and the cut-throat competition that would accompany it.

The best part of the book is its engrossing narrative style. The book deals with a complex subject and presents it in a simple and meaningful manner. The book is replete with humorous phrases and interesting anecdotes. It is indeed a complete manual on globalization. The most attractive feature of the book is a set of new concepts propounded

by the author such as :

- The ability “to learn how to learn” by trying to find out something worth imbibing in almost everything we see around us.
- “Lifetime employability” rather than ask for “lifetime employment”
- “Untouchables” - people whose jobs cannot be outsourced.

However, Friedman has ignored the role of entertainment and political encouragement in the flattening of the world. Perhaps the inclusion of these two factors would have made the book complete. Further, the author has not studied the social effect of globalization and has focused primarily on its commercial and financial aspect. He has not considered the fact that the conservative societies may put up a strong backlash against globalisation thereby, hindering its rapid growth.

On the whole, the book is a good attempt to cover the wide canvas of globalization in just four hundred and eighty-eight pages.