The first ingredient of a nation's economic system is its natural resources. The [United States](http://economics.about.com/od/unitedstates/) is rich in mineral resources and fertile farm soil, and it is blessed with a moderate climate. It also has extensive coastlines on both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, as well as on the Gulf of Mexico. Rivers flow from far within the continent, and the Great Lakes -- five large, inland lakes along the U.S. border with [Canada](http://economics.about.com/od/canada/) -- provide additional shipping access. These extensive waterways have helped shape the country's [economic growth](http://economics.about.com/od/taxesandeconomicgrowth/) over the years and helped bind America's 50 individual states together in a single economic unit. The second ingredient is labor, which converts [natural resources](http://economics.about.com/od/naturalresourceseconomics/) into goods. The number of available workers and, more importantly, their [productivity](http://economics.about.com/od/economicsglossary/g/productivity.htm) help determine the health of an economy. Throughout its history, the [United States](http://economics.about.com/od/unitedstates/) has experienced steady growth in the labor force, and that, in turn, has helped fuel almost constant economic expansion. Until shortly after World War I, most workers were immigrants from Europe, their immediate descendants, or African-Americans whose ancestors were brought to the Americas as slaves. In the early years of the 20th century, large numbers of Asians immigrated to the United States, while many Latin American immigrants came in later years.Although the [United States](http://economics.about.com/od/unitedstates/) has experienced some periods of high [unemployment](http://economics.about.com/od/unemployment/) and other times when labor was in short supply, immigrants tended to come when jobs were plentiful. Often willing to work for somewhat lower [wages](http://economics.about.com/od/wagesemployment/) than acculturated workers, they generally prospered, earning far more than they would have in their native lands. The nation prospered as well, so that the [economy](http://economics.about.com/) grew fast enough to absorb even more newcomers.The quality of available labor -- how hard people are willing to work and how skilled they are -- is at least as important to a country's economic success as the number of workers. In the early days of the United States, frontier life required hard work, and what is known as the Protestant work ethic reinforced that trait. A strong emphasis on education, including technical and vocational training, also contributed to America's economic success, as did a willingness to experiment and to change.Labor mobility has likewise been important to the capacity of the American [economy](http://economics.about.com/) to adapt to changing conditions. When immigrants flooded labor markets on the East Coast, many workers moved inland, often to farmland waiting to be tilled. Similarly, economic opportunities in industrial, northern cities attracted black Americans from southern farms in the first half of the 20th century.Labor-force quality continues to be an important issue. Today, Americans consider "human capital" a key to success in numerous modern, high-technology industries. As a result, government leaders and business officials increasingly stress the importance of education and training to develop workers with the kind of nimble minds and adaptable skills needed in new industries such as computers and telecommunications.But [natural resources](http://economics.about.com/od/naturalresourceseconomics/) and labor account for only part of an economic system. These resources must be organized and directed as efficiently as possible. In the American economy, managers, responding to signals from markets, perform this function. The traditional managerial structure in America is based on a top-down chain of command; authority flows from the chief executive in the boardroom, who makes sure that the entire business runs smoothly and efficiently, through various lower levels of management responsible for coordinating different parts of the enterprise, down to the foreman on the shop floor. Numerous tasks are divided among different divisions and workers. In early 20th-century America, this specialization, or division of labor, was said to reflect "scientific management" based on systematic analysis.Many enterprises continue to operate with this traditional structure, but others have taken changing views on management. Facing heightened global competition, American businesses are seeking more flexible organization structures, especially in high-technology industries that employ skilled workers and must develop, modify, and even customize products rapidly. Excessive hierarchy and division of labor increasingly are thought to inhibit creativity. As a result, many companies have "flattened" their organizational structures, reduced the number of managers, and delegated more authority to interdisciplinary teams of workers.