

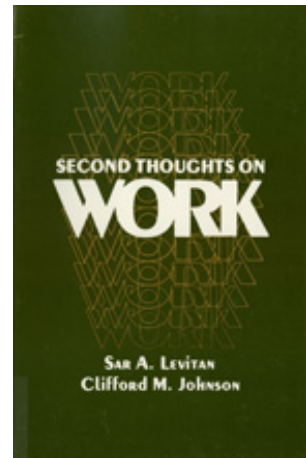


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Changes at Work

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1 Changes at Work

Life grants nothing to us
mortals without hard work.

—Horace, *Satires*

As the cornerstone of civilized society, there was little reason in centuries past to question either the nature or the future of work. From Biblical times well into the 20th century, work was intimately linked to both individual and collective survival, a necessity of life which required no explanation. Occasionally an author paused to examine the hardships of common laborers, but never with the expectation that their lot could be changed. Even if a handful were fortunate enough to enjoy a life of leisure, the prospect of a society in which many individuals were freed from work was beyond imagination for all but the most recent generations.

When earlier writers did turn their attention to the institution of work, it was usually in fear of some dwindling commitment to work which might threaten national survival and progress. As Sigmund Freud suggested, “After primal man had discovered that it lay in his own hands, literally, to improve his lot on earth by working, it cannot have been a matter of indifference whether another man worked.”¹ Thus, in both religious and secular literature the virtues of dedication and hard work were repeatedly extolled. In early American history, these themes are easily traced—Benjamin Franklin lamented that working days were being wasted “expensively

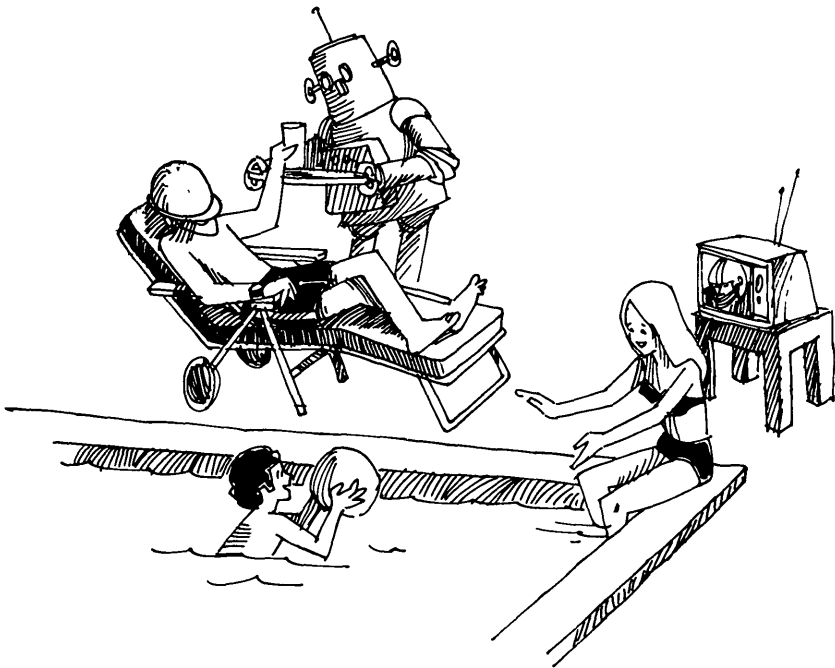
at the ale house,” and nearly a century later Abraham Lincoln still viewed the desire to work as “so rare a want that it should be encouraged.” These comments reflected popular views of prior generations, in which the nation was portrayed as teetering on the brink of economic and moral decline due to a widespread aversion to work.

The unprecedented economic growth and affluence during the three decades following World War II has begun to alter the way we view work in modern societies. In many ways, work no longer has the obvious role or significance which it carried for our predecessors, if only because each individual’s labor is no longer essential for societal or even personal sustenance. All but a tiny part of the workforce in 1900 was working to produce the goods necessary for common survival, but now more than six of every ten workers have no hand in these activities. We now have more cosmetologists than plumbers, more social workers than brickmasons, and more professors than coal miners. Our range of work options is broader than ever before, and at least collectively we have been freed from the constant struggle for survival. In this sense, work increasingly represents our will rather than our curse.

Modern Fears and Hopes

As we move ever further away from the direct production of goods, the option of changing work—or abandoning it completely—becomes more significant. Inevitably, it seems less clear why we work, and so the traditional fears of a decadent society that values leisure more than work persist. Yet in a more optimistic vein, this new freedom makes us wonder how our jobs might be reshaped in response to more lofty goals and needs. Thus, for perhaps the first time, we have become concerned not only with our motivation or willingness to work but also with our satisfaction at the workplace.

Those who perceive work as integrally related to social stability continue to view the weakening ties between work and survival with alarm. For example, David Riesman argued that the expansion of leisure “threatens to push work itself closer to the fringes of consciousness and significance.”² Daniel Bell views current trends in leisure and affluence as undermining the Protestant work ethic,³ and Christopher Lasch also contends that Americans identify “not with the work ethic but with the ethic of leisure, hedonism, and self-fulfillment.”⁴ Such predictions of work’s demise are seldom dispassionate—more typical is Arthur Schlesinger’s warning that “the most dangerous threat hanging over American society is the threat of leisure.”⁵ The fear of a decaying work ethic is so pervasive that the federal Department of Commerce initiated in the 1970s an advertising campaign to bolster an allegedly weakening commitment to work.



Of course, even if one accepts the premise that the will to work is eroding, the vision of the future which follows depends largely on one's view of human nature. Utopian forecasters rely on the same presumed trend toward a workless society which prophets of doom project, but these more optimistic observers view leisure as a stimulus rather than a threat to societal advancement. For those who see leisure as enhancing human development, technology becomes a panacea which frees individuals from the necessity of work without sacrificing gains in economic well-being. One may question the underlying view of a world without work, but such an eventuality would no doubt offer opportunities as well as dangers.

Analysts of work quality and worker satisfaction usually do not stretch recent gains in leisure into projections of a workless society, but they are often guilty of other excesses. In contrast to the image of technology as the great liberator from work, technological change is frequently portrayed as necessarily eliminating skilled work roles and reducing prospects for personal satisfaction at the workplace. Claims of widespread discontent among workers are forcefully advanced, along with sweeping promises of newly designed jobs which would heighten satisfaction within the workforce. In the eyes of work reform advocates, modern workers seek a wide array of challenges and rewards in their jobs, and employers have considerable latitude in redesigning jobs to meet these emerging needs. It is an appealingly optimistic vision, but one that may overestimate both our character and our capabilities.

When viewed collectively, contemporary discussions of work motivation and satisfaction present widely divergent visions of work's future, ranging from the catastrophic to the utopian. These disparate accounts reflect the ample room for confusion created by rapid changes in labor force participation, occupational structure, and technology during the

past few decades. Particularly when based on isolated trends, most sketches depicting the future of work shed more light on the hopes and fears of their authors than on the nature of tomorrow's workplace. Yet when labor market data are carefully examined in the context of broader social changes and market forces, a more coherent view of work in the 1990s and beyond emerges.

Chasing Expectations

The broad outlines of work's future will be shaped by the level of our expectations at the workplace and by our relative ability to respond to them. Although their influence reaches far beyond the labor market, current trends in wealth, education, and technology provide the driving forces behind the gradual evolution of work, raising expectations and setting the limits within which we can hope to fulfill them. Because of their scope, these sweeping changes in American society are frequently overlooked or given scant attention in topical studies of the workplace. Yet it is this set of forces which will have the greatest role in defining the goals of tomorrow's worker, affecting both the motivation to work and the prospects for job satisfaction.

The most pervasive force behind rising expectations is the increasing wealth of American society. The trend toward affluence is unmistakable: in the last three decades, the average American's spendable income has risen 87 percent, after allowing for inflation and higher federal income and payroll taxes. Thirty-five percent of all families had an income of \$25,000 or better in 1979, compared to only 8 percent with real incomes that high a quarter of a century earlier. Cast in more vivid terms, Americans spent more on liquor alone in 1981 than their grandparents and great-grandparents did on all goods and services a century ago. This unprecedented growth in real incomes has radically revised our lifestyles,

but more importantly it has lowered our tolerance for hardship and led us to expect even further gains.

To the extent that economic necessity provides a prime motivation to work, increasing affluence has weakened the ties between workers and their jobs. In addition to swelling the ranks of the independently wealthy, rising incomes have made possible a host of transfer payments which give many others the option not to work. During the 1970s, a decade commonly associated with conservative climates, these transfer payments increased 77 percent in real terms—an expansion of the welfare state without parallel. Most of these payments went to the retired, disabled and unemployed workers, and veterans, with less than one-fifth of the total devoted to “public assistance” provided on the basis of need. While the great majority of Americans still find it necessary to work, the evolution of the welfare state has softened the consequences of not working and provided new choices (such as early retirement) to those who do work.

The rising incomes and expectations of recent decades have had a mixed impact on work motivation. As burgeoning transfer payments approach one-sixth of the nation’s disposable income, and assuming real earnings resume their dominant upward course, Americans increasingly will be able to change jobs or reject work in response to rising expectations. At the same time, however, relative income appears to be much more relevant to work motivation than any absolute gains, so that individuals have strong incentives to keep working no matter what release from work they could have collectively reaped from productivity gains. Like the mechanical rabbit leading the greyhounds around the racetrack, goals have consistently stayed ahead of productivity. This alone will keep most of us tied to work in the decades ahead.

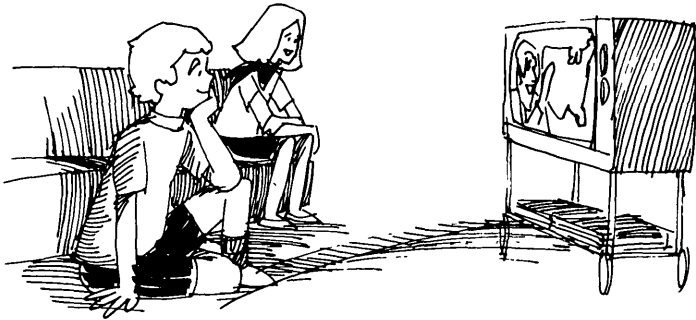
In the same manner that rising affluence has led us to expect steadily growing incomes, rising levels of educational at-

tainment have caused us to expect greater challenges and skill requirements in our jobs. Again, the data reflect unquestionable gains in education: In the three decades following 1950, the proportion of the adult population that completed four years of high school almost doubled, jumping from 34.3 percent to 67 percent. Half of American workers had at least a whiff of college education (12.7 years of schooling) by 1980, four more years than attained by the average worker in 1940 when half the labor force had barely completed elementary school. In virtually all occupational categories, Americans are entering the labor force later and with more educational background than ever before, creating both opportunities and strains at the modern workplace.

If a few added years of history and algebra represented the full scope of educational expansion, the impact on worker expectations might be rather limited. Yet these extensions of formal education have been accentuated by a veritable “information explosion” which has raised the gazes of even the most isolated Americans far beyond their immediate surroundings. Unlike the closed world of our grandparents—without radio, television, and often even newspapers—in which values and aspirations changed slowly, we are now more aware of the lives which others enjoy. With this greater awareness, “overeducated” workers are more likely to be unhappy in their jobs or even to reject the work which society requires for its maintenance. The educational gains do create the possibility of more demanding work roles, but the failure of skill requirements to keep pace with educational improvements is likely to leave workers less, rather than more, satisfied with their jobs.

Finally, as changes in relative wealth and access to information raise expectations, changes in technology will dictate the extent to which we can respond to new demands at the workplace. Technological advances have broadened occupa-

tional choices for some, freeing women from housekeeping chores and transforming the world into a much smaller place through innovations in transportation and communications. For other segments of the workforce, technological change is a more ominous force, eliminating skilled jobs and displacing workers in declining manufacturing industries. The development of new technologies does not lead in a single direction in the formation of tomorrow's workplace, but it does present a set of real constraints too often overlooked by those who would reshape work to meet rising expectations.



Any one of these broad social changes, when viewed in isolation, can be used as the basis for extreme predictions regarding the future of work. Increasing wealth has been linked to both the demise of work and as the key to expanding occupational choice and worker satisfaction. Added education and greater awareness lead some to project revolutions at the workplace while causing others to hope for an era of increasingly skilled and challenging work roles. Technology may render workers obsolete, or simply eliminate the most harsh and unrewarding jobs while opening new work opportunities. In all areas, the changes are so broad as to create endless possibilities for their selective application, but such prophecies are myopic and misleading. Only when viewed together and assessed with the guidance of

current labor market data is it possible to construct a coherent picture of the future of work in a rapidly changing society.

The Commitment to Work

The dangers of extrapolating disparate trends are most clearly demonstrated by predictions that work will disappear. Although the vision of a society in which many are freed from work is not illogical, current work patterns do not support such claims, but reflect great continuity with the work habits of our predecessors. The length of the full-time workweek, which steadily decreased during the first four decades of this century, has stabilized at a nearly universal 40-hour week since World War II. More surprisingly, the proportion of the population that works has actually increased during this century, bolstered by growing labor force participation among women. Even recent survey results confirm a continuing attachment to work—a Roper Organization survey found that only one in five people place more emphasis on their personal satisfaction and pleasure than on working hard and doing a good job,⁶ and 85 percent of those interviewed by the American Council of Life Insurance believe that success in life is dependent on their working hard.⁷ If we are really about to abandon work, somebody had better tell the workers.

Rising levels of affluence among American workers have had an effect on work trends—today's jobholders are increasingly opting for greater leisure through paid vacations and holidays, and they are also spending fewer years of their lives working than ever before, retiring earlier in spite of growing life spans. Yet any expectations of freedom from work have been matched by expectations of higher incomes, limiting the scope of movements away from work. Rather than shunning their jobs, Americans have responded to rising productivity and affluence partially by seeking higher in-

comes and partially by enjoying more “free time” while employed. These choices reflect somewhat predictable market decisions regarding the marginal utility of additional income and leisure, and such work-leisure tradeoffs can be expected to continue in the years ahead.

The economic incentives to work will not dissipate for the great majority of workers in the foreseeable future, and even this unlikely event would not lead to a workless society. Work fulfills a variety of needs in modern societies, providing not only an income but a sense of identity, of community and of purpose. Already we call many activities freely chosen by individuals “work,” and as we move further away from the effort to clothe and feed ourselves, our understanding of the nature of work will continue to change. Feudal lords would probably not have viewed many of our contemporary pursuits as work, but according to a modern definition we will continue to work nonetheless.



work (wŭrk), *n.* [ME. *werk*; AS. *werc, weorc*; akin to G. *werk*; IE. base **werǵ-*, to do, act, seen also in Gr. *ergon* (for **wergon*), action, work (cf. ERG), *organon*, tool, instrument (cf. ORGAN)], 1. bodily or mental effort exerted to do or make something; purposeful activity; labor; toil. 2. employment: as, out of *work*. 3. occupation; business; trade; craft; profession: as, his *work* is selling. 4. *a*) something one is making, doing, or acting upon, especially as one's occupation or duty; task; undertaking: as, he laid out his *work*. *b*) the amount of this: as, a day's *work*. 5. something that has been made or done; result of effort or activity; specifically, *a*) usually *pl.* an act; deed: as, a person of good *works*. *b*) *pl.* collected writings: as, the *works* of Whitman. *c*) *pl.* engineering structures, as bridges, dams, docks,

Satisfaction at the Workplace

The continuing willingness of Americans to work is no guarantee of their satisfaction at the workplace. Workers may reluctantly conclude that unrewarding jobs are preferable to no jobs at all, but the potential for worker discontent remains a legitimate source of concern. At the same time, if claims of widespread dissatisfaction at the workplace are to become mandates for public or private remedies, the burden of proof must lie with the critics of work. Thus far, their case has not been convincing.

Efforts to gauge worker dissatisfaction and identify shifts in such attitudes over time pose numerous research problems. Surveys which attempt to assess worker discontent are plagued by methodological shortcomings, with results varying widely depending on how survey questions are phrased and responses collected and interpreted. Because work is so closely associated with one's identity and self-esteem, measures of work satisfaction invariably provoke defensive reactions which preserve one's self-image and dignity. Hence, workers are found to be generally satisfied with their jobs, but also to feel underutilized and inadequately challenged by their work roles. Without admitting that they have "settled" for unsatisfying jobs, respondents react to specific questions of work quality by criticizing the constraints inherent in their roles and thereby preserving their sense of self-esteem.

As difficult as it is to develop meaningful measures of worker satisfaction, it is even harder to construct defensible claims of long term changes in worker attitudes. While sizable portions of the workforce are no doubt (and justifiably) unhappy with their jobs, we have little basis for comparing this level of dissatisfaction with that of prior generations. The few available longitudinal studies on work satisfaction have encountered difficulties in distinguishing

attitude changes of workers as they grow older from broader societal shifts over time. For this reason, we may believe that worker discontent is sufficiently prevalent to warrant public attention and concern, but calls for remedial action based on the claims that dissatisfaction is spreading and work quality deteriorating are sorely lacking empirical support.

Looking at the occupational shifts already underway in the labor market, it seems impossible to predict whether the prospects for satisfaction at the workplace will improve or diminish in the foreseeable future. The well-worn generalizations concerning shifts from blue-collar to white-collar and from manufacturing to service roles identify the broad directions of occupational change, but these observations reveal surprisingly little about the future quality of work. White-collar or service jobs will not necessarily be better or more rewarding than those which they replace, and much will depend on the expectations which tomorrow's workers bring to these new jobs. The most certain and significant variables in the satisfaction of future generations are the continuing gains in education and awareness among workers, which may lead to deeper concerns for work quality within the ranks of both labor and management. Revolution at the workplace still seems most unlikely, but a gradual evolution of priorities at work could have an important effect on the nature of jobs in decades to come.

The Attempt to Reform Work

Most discussions of work reform stem from a belief that much of today's work is unacceptably bleak and unrewarding. Such judgments are inherently subjective, and run the risk of underestimating the full diversity of worker interests and needs which shape expectations and attitudes on the job. Nevertheless, there remains a humanitarian quality to work reform efforts which justifies their pursuit even in the absence of impending crises. Where the potential for im-

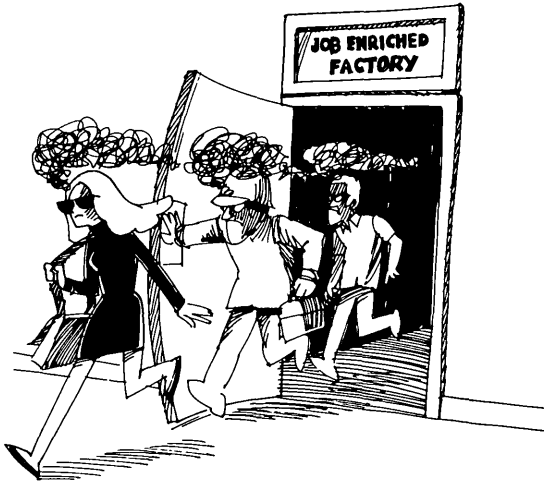
proving the organization and design of work exists within the bounds of technological and economic constraints, no threat of uprising should be necessary to ensure work reform initiatives.

The accumulating literature on work reform—first focusing on costly job redesign schemes and more recently on broad issues of participative management—has served a useful purpose. Advocates of work reform have succeeded in calling the attention of managers to the costs of excessive specialization and to the potential for tapping the knowledge of workers. Another byproduct of the work reform debate has been the occasional readiness of managers to reconsider the importance of worker commitment and morale as a “human variable” in analyses of production efficiency. Although the wholesale revision of work organizations has rarely been attempted, the critics of work have at least temporarily alerted some management and labor representatives to unattended problems in the workplace. The extent to which reform advocates can sustain that interest and actually change established practices remains to be seen.

Because they have tended to overstate their case, proponents of work reform are likely to encounter considerable skepticism in the years ahead. Concentrating on visions of meaningful work and rhetoric about the elimination of “dehumanizing” jobs, advocates of “work enrichment” and job redesign have failed to heed the technological constraints and economic considerations which establish the limits of potential work reform. They paid scant attention to questions of who will bear the costs of reforming work and what incentives managements will have to do so. Furthermore, specialized functions in work organizations were treated as though they were developed on a wholly irrational basis; Adam Smith’s famous observations on the effect of a division of labor in the manufacture of pins are somehow

forgotten.⁸ Assuming that reform initiatives are designed to be implemented voluntarily in a manner consistent with market forces, their prospects for adoption seem far more limited than advocates suggest.

It is appealing to imagine a world in which there are no losers, in which both labor and management benefit by new approaches to work design and management. Under this scenario, workers would enjoy new challenges and accept greater responsibility in their jobs, heightening prospects for self-fulfillment at the workplace. Similarly, managers would be compensated for the time and effort they devoted to work reform by the increased productivity of a more satisfied workforce. Yet such anticipations assume an overriding community of interest between labor and management far different from the adversarial roles which have characterized American labor-management relations. While hard times may spur brief periods of reconciliation and cooperation between employers and their workers, such spells are not likely to be long-lived.



Redesigned jobs or participative management efforts may serve as good public relations props, but private firms cannot be expected to spend money for the sole purpose of enhancing worker satisfaction. While cooperation may be possible on narrowly-defined projects of limited duration, the commitment of management to work reform experiments will last only as long as they generate tangible returns in improved product quality and higher profits. And if workers perceive reform initiatives as giving management higher profits while they get far less tangible rewards, even labor support for such experiments may be shortlived.

Dramatic improvements in work quality—with worker satisfaction given priority over productivity and profits—will be achieved only through the traditional adversarial mechanisms of labor-management relations, won as workers' rights in the same manner as higher pay, safer working conditions, and restrictive work rules. To date, organized labor has not been willing to push work quality issues in collective bargaining, at least in part because the rank and file are not prepared to trade pay and benefits for less tangible or known rewards. As the education and expectations of workers continue to rise, however, unions may extend their agenda to include these issues, thereby ensuring a more lasting and determined move toward satisfying work in the years ahead.

The Future

In rejecting more dramatic claims of a disintegrating work ethic or of workplaces redesigned along utopian lines, the picture of the future which remains is more one of gradual change than of radical departures from work as we know it today. Americans will continue to work, although more and more will enjoy the benefits of leisure through longer vacations, added paid holidays, and more part-time employment. Menial and unrewarding jobs will persist, although the in-

cumbents will increasingly wear a white collar or perform their work in service roles as opposed to the classic stereotypes of harsh factory work. Consultants will envision better worlds using values and priorities we all might embrace, but in the absence of sharp political and economic upheavals the technological and economic forces of the marketplace will continue to dictate the organization and design of work.

There are a number of encouraging trends to be found in current work patterns. Growing segments of the workforce will enjoy freedom of choice in work, selecting their preferred occupations and switching jobs with relative ease. Leisure gains will allow individuals unprecedented control over their lives, enabling them to pursue their interests outside of work as well as selecting the work they will do on the job. There is even some hope that the needs and motivation of workers will be given additional attention in the coming decades, as human resources are reassessed for their potential contributions to economic growth.

This relatively bright outlook of the future of work is clouded by the awareness that not all segments of the labor force will share its fruits. Amidst disturbing signs of a widening gap between the most and least fortunate workers, the danger to American society is that increasing numbers of workers will be excluded from productive work or confined to menial and unrewarding jobs. The pace of technological change threatens to displace growing numbers of workers in declining manufacturing sectors, and the expansion of skilled employment will be of little consolation to the uneducated with limited or narrow skills. The challenge for public policy in the labor market will be to minimize these disparities in work experience, and to ensure that opportunities are offered for those left behind to partake in a society of growing affluence, freedom and leisure at work.