



THANK GOD, IT'S MONDAY

by James O'Toole

"If a man will begin in certainties," said Francis Bacon, "he will end in doubts." That could be the motto of academic researchers who have been studying American workers' values and attitudes, and how both affect the workplace.

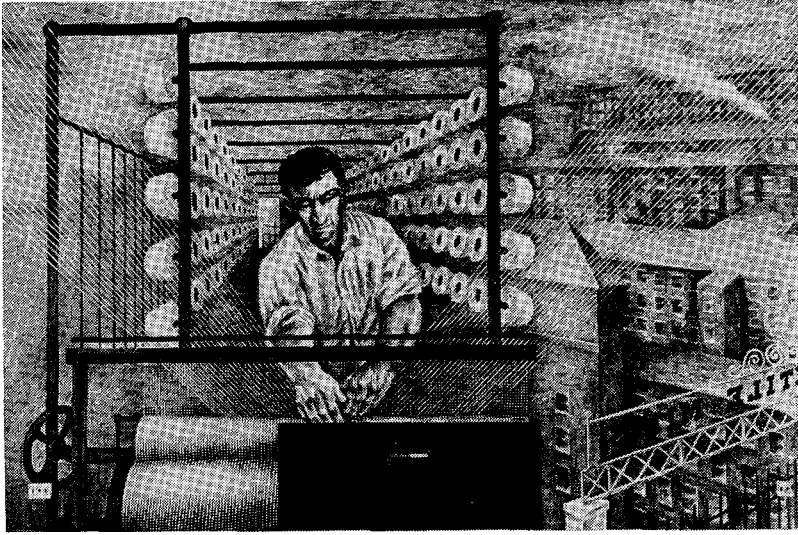
Despite years of valiant effort, scholars have been unable to link cause and effect in explanations of workers' attitudes and behavior. For example, it is impossible to say with "scientific" certainty that workers with interesting jobs are better motivated than those with dull jobs. It is impossible to demonstrate a growing discontent with work, a changing attitude among the young toward employment, or a blue-collar revolt against the assembly line. Many of us who are professional observers of the work force *believe* these things, but we cannot *prove* them.

We had more confidence during the early 1970s. Then, teams of researchers at the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center claimed they had data showing that American workers were bored and alienated—that the "inhumane" way in which tasks were organized by management inhibited workers' "self-actualization"—jargon for living up to one's potential.* Underlying this idea was the purported existence of a "hierarchy of human needs," an idea pioneered by psychologist Abraham Maslow in the 1940s.

As Maslow saw it, all people have the same "order" of needs, beginning with food and shelter, and rising, rung by rung, through security, friendship, and esteem. At the top: the crowning human achievement, "self-actualization." According to Maslow, as each level of need is met, the next slides into view, like rolls of candy in a dime-store dispenser. Since American workers, in the main, are tolerably safe, secure, affluent, and befriended, they must now, social scientists assumed, be yearning for self-actualization.

Once Maslow's assumptions were accepted (by more academics and journalists than labor leaders or businessmen), a

*See the 1969 *Survey of Working Conditions* and the 1972-73 *Quality of Employment Survey*, Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.



Textile Mills by Ben Shahn, 1938. The Bronx Central Annex Post Office.

whole array of conclusions about work flowed as easily as marbles off a tilted table:

¶ Because work is organized in a stultifying, assembly-line manner, job satisfaction is thwarted.

¶ There is widespread discontent with working conditions, particularly among blue-collar employees.

¶ America's affluent workers are now more likely to be motivated by interesting jobs than by money or other material rewards.

¶ Jobs can readily be redesigned or "enriched" to reduce worker alienation and increase productivity.

The University of Michigan findings seemed to back up these conclusions. But a skeptical 1978 analysis, *Managers and Work Reform* by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Ivar Berg and his colleagues, revealed that it just wasn't so. The studies didn't prove much of anything at all.

At about the same time that Berg was putting the scalpel to the Michigan surveys, another team of academic surgeons was slicing up pollster Daniel Yankelovich's decade-long studies showing that a "New Breed" of young Americans held nontraditional attitudes about work. (He contended, for example, that this New Breed wanted "something more" out of work, hoped to "keep on growing," and recognized a special "duty to themselves.") Yankelovich, president of Yankelovich, Skelly, and

White, Inc., and one of the most imaginative and reputable of U.S. opinion surveyers, glumly saw his work nit-picked to shreds on methodological grounds at a 1978 conference on work sponsored by the Work in America Institute.*

Interestingly, however, while the specialists were busy castigating each other's survey techniques, a small number of progressive companies leapfrogged this sterile debate and actually transformed working conditions on the unverified assumption that workers' attitudes and values had indeed changed. The Ford Foundation's Robert Schrank, one of the few specialists on working who has actually "worked" for a living (he has been a plumber, auto mechanic, and machinist), and I recently invited 20 authorities on work to sit down together and talk about what was actually happening in the workplace. These specialists had, among them, first-hand observations of several hundred U.S. factories and offices, and while nothing approaching a consensus emerged, there was some agreement that a handful of companies are changing job conditions in a variety of creative ways and that workers are responding positively and productively.

A good place to start is with a glimpse inside one of the nation's newest factories.

Case #1: ICI Americas, Inc., recently opened a factory in Bayport, near Houston, Texas, to produce agricultural chemicals. Although it employs only about 90 (nonunion) workers, the plant cost \$85 million to build; it is one of the world's most fully-automated production facilities. Machines do nearly all the basic work, and when things are going right, there is so little for workers to do that they spend their time sitting around chatting or reading.

Yet, surprisingly, the performance of each worker is more important to the productivity of the plant than it would be in a more labor-intensive facility. Since computers, robots, and other devices handle all the routine tasks, the workers—who typically have high school di-

*My own record is not unblemished. In 1973, I was responsible for the *Work in America* report to the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare (Cambridge: MIT Press), which, among other things, advocated the "reform" of the American workplace based on social science research that has since been ignominiously discredited. *Mea culpa.*

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MOVING TALENT AROUND

When Harold Geneen left Raytheon Co. for ITT in 1959, Boyden Associates was the broker. Korn/Ferry International was ready in 1970 when the Nixon administration had some top managerial slots to fill. Russell Reynolds Associates, Egon Zehnder International, and Heidrick and Struggles all take on similar assignments.

These American companies—and 500 others like them—are executive recruiters, better known as “headhunters.” They do what top managers often do not have time to do: find and hire needed talent away from other corporations. In the process, they often spot promising juniors and rescue senior men from dead-end jobs. When headhunters call, executives listen. The quest for more responsibility—and a bigger piece of the pie—does not, after all, preoccupy only rank-and-file workers.

Executive recruiting is growing fast. (Total 1979 billings: \$180 million.) Last year, headhunters placed 12,000 men and women in executive jobs in the United States alone; 800 of these positions came with salaries of at least \$100,000. “The headhunter is not in the business of helping individuals,” one Washington-based talent scout wrote recently. The corporation is always the client. The fee: usually about 30 percent of the salary for the position a company is seeking to fill, paid whether the job is filled or not.

plomas plus a year of college (about the national average)—must take the initiative in dealing with unanticipated problems. Says a company executive: “Workers here make bigger decisions, so they run the risk of making bigger mistakes.”

The management has abandoned old-style industrial discipline (e.g., sending rule-breakers home, docking them a day’s pay). The company executive explains: “If somebody has broken a safety rule, we want him to think about the responsibility for the safety of others, not about how he got ‘cheated’ out of a day’s pay.” All workers are paid on the same pay scale.

There are two reasons for a stopover at ICI on a Cook’s tour of “front-line” workplaces. First, the plant helps to undermine the old assembly-line stereotype that Americans typically associate with factory work. In fact, when you count in the millions of workers in “service” industries, government employees, and all the repairmen, technicians, clerical workers, skilled workers,

supervisors, and executives, it turns out that less than 1 percent of all U.S. workers are on assembly lines.

Second, ICI managers are attempting to deal with what might be called the Three Mile Island Syndrome that occurs whenever workers must perform sophisticated tasks without constant supervision. While the consequences of a mistake in a chemical plant are seldom as potentially dangerous as they are in a nuclear power plant, they are still serious and *will* have adverse effects on productivity. This is one of the ironic side effects of automation. Eventually, most simple, repetitive, manufacturing tasks will be done by machines or by workers in such places as Asia, Africa, and South America, where labor is cheap. The United States will be left with industrial jobs that require problem-solving and initiative from workers who will have to care about their jobs—and about their coworkers.

The challenge to managers during the next decade will be to figure out how best to tap into the natural abilities and acquired skills of 100 million relatively well-educated American workers. Unfortunately, few plant managers are ready to let workers take the initiative. Time and again, in almost every instance where workers have assumed (or tried to assume) significant responsibility for their work, managers have tried to kill off such efforts:

Case #2: When the Gaines Pet Food Plant in Topeka, Kansas, was opened 10 years ago, productivity ran about 40 percent higher than at a traditionally designed and managed Gaines plant; absenteeism and grievances were negligible. It seemed that the source of the productivity and morale at Topeka was that the plant's 70 nonunion workers had shouldered some managerial responsibility: for allocating tasks among the workforce; recruiting new workers; electing leaders of work teams; and setting their own work schedules.

Indeed, the need for supervisors and middle-managers in the plant was eliminated entirely. But within five years after the plant had opened, the top brass at General Foods headquarters had succeeded in bringing Topeka into line with the company's standard operating procedures; possibly their most satisfying act was to introduce several layers of supervisors and managers into the Topeka operation. The responsibility and, ultimately, the productivity of the self-managing teams were thus gradually whittled away.

It is a sad fact that almost all of the well-publicized efforts of the 1970s to restructure the work environment have failed to

survive intact. The general pattern—in more than 100 plants, ranging from a radio factory to a telephone company—is one of a brief leap forward followed by prolonged backsliding.

The fault has not rested only with reluctant managers.

The experimental designs were monolithic. The redesigners often fell back into the industrial engineer's trap of trying to find the "one best way" to do a job. In effect, then, they simply substituted one inflexible design for another. Indeed, in their approach to the workplace, some "reformers" have been about as delicate and adaptable as Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856–1915), Father of "Scientific Management." Taylor and his efficiency experts, backed by time-and-motion studies, made a standard of the stopwatch and generally alienated every factory worker with whom they came in contact.

The experimental designs were static. The only thing that has ever been proved "scientifically" about workers' behavior is that their productivity will improve when they are made subjects of an experiment. Always.

What turns the workers on? Apparently they are responding to a tangible sign that their bosses *care* enough to try something new. This so-called Hawthorne Effect (named after experiments conducted in the late 1920s at the Western Electric Company's Hawthorne plant in Cicero, Illinois) is manifested by spurts in productivity only for about as long as the managers sustain their interest. The trick, then, is to design an experiment that never stops. Sadly, most of the job enrichment experiments of the 1970s have been one-shot quick fixes and, hence, no fixes at all.

The redesigners succumbed to Maslow's "self-actualization" ideal. In other words, the reformers expected workers to be more productive but not to share in the gravy. The assumptions were that intrinsic, psychic rewards are everything and that workers are not interested in such vulgar considerations as money.

Not all experimenting company managements have been deluded on this point. "Enrichment," after all, has many meanings:

Case #3: Since 1934, the Lincoln Electric Company of Cleveland, Ohio, the world's largest manufacturer of arc welding machines and electrodes, has rewarded workers in cold cash for their efforts. Creativity and entrepreneurial initiative are especially prized. Already highly paid to start with, workers at the nonunion company receive an annual bonus based on four criteria (output, quality of work, cooperation, and ideas to improve productivity). This bonus effectively *doubles* the annual income of the average employee to about \$39,000 a year, according



There's more to life than just hard work, noted this 1926 ad for Dr. Eliot's Five-Foot Shelf of Books:

"Horses do hard work and get nothing but their board. . . . Send for the free book that gives the secret of earning more by learning more."

to the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Workers at Lincoln are encouraged to find ways to eliminate their own jobs—and get promoted if they do. The firm has a job security agreement with its 2,550 employees and has not laid off one person since it promised not to in 1951. Worker productivity at Lincoln is about 100 percent higher than in U.S. industry in general, and the sales price of its products has not increased in several decades.

In every company where work reform has been more than a flash in the pan, the guiding principles have been teamwork, cooperation, trust, responsibility—and collective participation in decisions and profits. Significantly, such reforms have not started as small-scale experiments, which were then diffused throughout the company. Rather, the reforms that have taken hold were *systematic and total*. That is one reason why reform has succeeded in small firms and industries but only rarely has taken hold in large corporations.

Ironically, then, work reform, though democratic in its consequences, tends to work best when despotic in its inception—when top management orders it done, and stands firm against the rearguard actions of threatened middle-managers or the grumblings of local union officials.

While one might assume that the “guiding principles” of

work reform enumerated above would be consistent with the goals of the labor movement, most union leaders, in fact, are hostile to such reforms. Part of the unions' skepticism is understandable—they've seen too many changes proposed by management that turned out to be sheer exploitation disguised as Good Samaritanism. ("If you want to enrich the job, enrich the paycheck," says William Winpisinger, president of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers.) But there is another reason for labor leaders' lack of enthusiasm: Work reform does nothing to enhance union power.

Nevertheless, some unions, such as the United Auto Workers, are making an honest effort to cope with work reform. (The UAW has undertaken several demonstration projects with General Motors.) The preface to a 1978 contract between Shell Canada and the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers International shows that some union leaders have been reading Maslow, too:

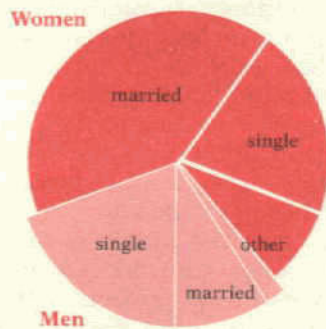
Employees should be permitted to contribute and grow to their fullest potential and capability without constraints or artificial barriers, with compensation based on their demonstrated knowledge and skills rather than on tasks being performed at any specific time.

Admittedly, researchers have not found much demand among workers for such conditions. Indeed, when asked, workers generally want to change only such trivial things as lighting and the placement of water coolers. But experiments, unlike survey research, show that once workers get involved in decision-making, they quickly move from trivia to the tough underlying issues. It seems that workers *initially* do not demand more because experience has taught them that they do not have the power to change anything that is important.

Another reason why there is not more apparent demand for basic change is that there is a presumption, among both managers and workers, in favor of the status quo. For example, few workplaces are more medieval than the corporate law office, but the existing model is accepted without question because that is the way things have always been. Yet there are alternatives:

Case #4: Typically, large law firms hire young lawyers (associates) and condemn them to dog work for seven years. Associates willingly submit in the hope of one day becoming partners; they forego vacations, weekends, and a good many lunches in order to impress the partners with their dedication.

PART-TIME WORKERS



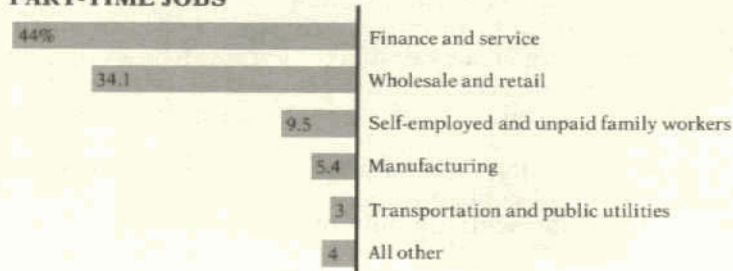
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Fifteen million Americans work exclusively on part-time (less than 35 hours per week) schedules, and 4 million more "moonlight" in part-time jobs. The proportion of part-time employees has grown rapidly since 1958, from 1 in 12 workers to 1 in 7. Most part-timers are happy with their lot, but about 20 percent of them are "involuntary" part-time workers who are looking for, but have been unable to find, full-time jobs. Students, pensioners, and mothers dominate the part-time market, working, on average, 18 hours per week.

A key reason for the growth in part-time employment is the expansion of the "service" sector of the economy, particularly restaurants, shops, and recreational facilities that must remain open to fit the leisure hours of people who work a standard 40-hour week.

There have been some notable experiments in industry. Since 1970, for example, Control Data Corporation's bindery in St. Paul, Minnesota—the plant packages computer manuals—has been staffed entirely by part-time workers. Some 75 women, most of whom have children in school, work the "mothers' shift," 7:00 A.M. to noon. They are replaced by 56 high school students from 12:30 to 4:30.

PART-TIME JOBS



In contrast, Munger, Tolles, and Rickerhauser in Los Angeles was founded by a group of young lawyers who decided to trade off the possibility of hitting the financial jackpot in favor of work satisfaction. Some of their policies seem purely hedonistic: First year lawyers get a month of vacation, for example. Other policies affect the work itself. New associates deal with real clients, not just footnotes; from the start, they are given full responsibility for entire cases. Promotions to partnership are made at the end of three years.

This means that the firm is top-heavy with partners (two for every one associate, the exact opposite of most firms). It also means that the difference in compensation between partners and associates is smaller than usual. In lieu of Beverly Hills mansions, attorneys at Munger Tolles have the opportunity to take sabbaticals and do extensive *pro bono* work on firm time. The bottom line: The firm is reputed to have some of the finest lawyers in Southern California.

The work policies at this firm are remarkably consistent with the latest survey research about what is important to workers on the eve of the 1980s. The most recent and best designed Michigan study (the 1977 *Quality of Employment Survey*) has found that one-half of employed Americans have problems with the inflexibility of their working schedules; one-third of these workers say long working hours interfere with their family life. In another study, *Exchanging Earnings for Leisure*, Fred Best of the Department of Labor has found that 70 percent of American workers would be willing to give up 2 percent *or more* of their income for less time at work.

Such findings, for what they are worth, are at least in keeping with the only workplace revolution predicted in the early 1970s that is actually happening: flexitime.* Flexitime was pioneered in 1967 by Christel Kaemmerer, a management consultant at Messerschmitt-Bolkow's industrial complex in West Germany. The idea caught on in the Federal Republic, where it has been adopted by some 6,000 companies and their (mostly white-collar) employees. It is slowly catching on in the United States: Between 1974 and 1978, the proportion of Americans with flexible working schedules doubled, from 4 to 8 percent of the work force, or about 7 million people.

*"Flexitime" generally means that the working day is composed of a "core" period (10:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M., for example) during which all employees must be present, plus flexible time. Thus, Metropolitan Life in New York lets employees come in at any time between 7:30 a.m. and 10:00 a.m., but all must put in a full eight-hour day.

UP AND DOWN AND SIDEWAYS

Historically, there has been considerable inequality in the incomes of individual American workers, even as all incomes have grown. In 1975, for example, the most prosperous fifth of all American families earned at least \$22,000; the bottom fifth earned no more than \$6,914.

Of late, critics like Richard de Lone (*Small Futures*, 1979) have contended that this American class system is fixed, not dynamic and fluid; that an individual's income, job, and status depend on race and class, not ability, education, and luck. The remedy, de Lone suggests, is federal action to equalize incomes through taxes and subsidies.

Yet, recent major statistical studies show that social mobility and "opportunity" have, in fact, increased: Education has helped blacks as well as whites. Little publicized, these analyses include *Opportunity and Change* by David L. Featherman and Robert M. Hauser (1978), Stephan Thernstrom's historical *The Other Bostonians* (1973), and Richard Freeman's *Black Elite* (1976).

Rags-to-respectability if not rags-to-riches is common enough. According to Featherman and Hauser's 1973 data, of every 100 sons of unskilled workers, 23 make it to the professional ranks, 12 to the clerical level, and 24 to the level of skilled craftsmen, while 40 remain laborers like their dads and 1 drops to farm-worker status. Of 100 sons of top professionals or managers, only 59 do as well as their fathers; indeed, 16 become unskilled laborers or service workers. Citing these findings, *Washington Post* columnist William Greider wrote: "America is not simply onward-and-upward; it is up-and-down and often sideways."

If the watchword of the 1980s is likely to be flexibility, then today's airline stewardess may be the prototypical service worker of the next decade:

Case #5: The stewardess on TWA Flight 19 from Washington to Los Angeles is filling out her request for next month's flight assignment. As long as she works the equivalent of 16 days a month, she is free to schedule her flights in almost any pattern she chooses. Stewardesses who have children can schedule many short day flights; those who like to travel can schedule flights with long layovers in distant cities. Students can cluster their hours around their class schedules. The stewardess says: "The best part about this job is that it allows you to plan to enjoy the non-work part of your life."

Admittedly, stewardesses (and stewards, too—this *is* 1980) have more flexibility than the average worker. But the general trend in the workforce is toward more flexibility. Indeed, one of the least noticed facts about the workforce is that now nearly one-fifth of all employed Americans—including 90 percent of the 250,000 people on the payroll of McDonald's fast-food restaurants—are part-time workers.

Social science techniques may still be too primitive to measure the changes, but my own guess is that young (under 35) workers today really do want some different things from work than did the Depression era adolescents who became their parents. That is not to say they don't want some of the same things, too—like a decent income.

Many who were at an impressionable age during the Depression—including corporation executives now in their late 50s and 60s—had fathers who had trouble getting or keeping a job, any job. As youths, they may have had to forego not just luxuries but even basic necessities. It is not surprising that people who so suffered would make security the Sirius in their firmament of values. This desire for security is complemented by other qualities: loyalty to organization, stability, materialism. Work is seen as a necessity, *not* as an option, and while the conditions Depression-era alumni have on the job may not be perfect, they are a lot better than what existed during the 1930s.

In contrast, the postwar boom babies (now between 20 and 35 years old) were at impressionable ages during an era of incredible affluence and high expectations. Moreover, this "Woodstock generation" is better educated than the preceding one; its members have lived through a time when women and minorities have sought to transform centuries-old social patterns. Many in this group learned from the Vietnam protests that even the most inertial of institutions—the U.S. government—could in fact be moved. Given such experiences, it is not surprising that for these young people the brightest stars in the heavens seem to be change, flexibility, diversity, choice.

Alas, I have no *proof* that these are indeed the work values cherished by the largest "age cohort" in American history. But I suspect that employers who design work in order to conform to these qualities—in effect, tapping the self-interest of young workers—will find their employees as productive in the 1980s and '90s as another generation was in the '50s and '60s.