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Western Assembly on Changing World: 1974, remarks

JEROME M. ROSOW

Institute of Industrial Relations

Western Assembly, University of California at (Berkeley)  
Carmel, California

May 30, 1974

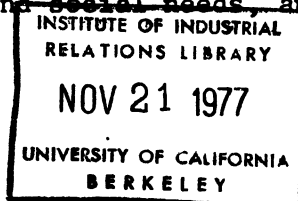
Recently Chou En-lai, Premier of The People's Republic of China, was discussing Maoism with a Western visitor. He noted that only 5% of the Chinese people do not support Chairman Mao, or agree with the Chinese way of life. Then the brilliant Chinese philosopher paused, looked thoughtfully at his visitor and said: "However, 5% amounts to 40 million people!"

Apply the same test to America. Only change the question to job satisfaction, instead of political philosophy. In 1973, 77% expressed work satisfaction. But, 23% were either dissatisfied or expressed no opinion. The 11% who admitted that they were dissatisfied equals about eleven million people.

Is job satisfaction an issue whose time has come? Certainly the public debate attests to the vitality of the problem. The recently completed auto negotiations attest to the fact that the quality of working life has moved from academic debate to hard talk at the bargaining table and into print in the labor contract.

In the changing world of the seventies are Americans achieving a reasonable degree of social and personal satisfaction in their jobs where they spend over 2,000 hours each year -- and over 40 years in a lifetime?

Somehow the issue has attracted two opposing groups: Those who exalt the American economy and idealize its achievements and conclude American workers never had it so good; and others who are champions of the worker, idealizing human psychic and social needs, and decrying the failure of



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private enterprise to humanize work. In a sense the heat and vitality of this controversy establishes the validity of the issue. Otherwise the debate would have died out long ago.

In recent years the quality of work issue has enjoyed a new vogue of public attention, despite the fact that it has yet to rank among the top national priorities. It is an emerging issue which will demand more attention and better solutions. It is an issue which will not quietly disappear. The sluggish productivity of the second half of the sixties and the remarkable 5½% drop in the first quarter of 1974; the Nixon appeal to blue-collar workers; the formation of a National Commission on Productivity; the rash of legislative proposals; the passage of the first Occupational Health & Safety Act in 1970; the bursting seminars and conferences; the flood of new books and news magazine cover stories and the resurgence of readership interest in such human interest material all confirm that there is a genuine problem. Albeit a problem without simple solutions.

Prof. Alvin W. Gouldner, an American sociologist, recently contributed a summary essay to the British book entitled, Work, Volume 2. This fascinating book contains twenty personal accounts by men and women who described their thoughts and feelings about their work in their own words.

Quoting from Gouldner's essay:

"The quality of work in industrial society, like several other realms there, is not quite what it seems. (Or perhaps the trouble is that it is exactly what it seems.) The world of work is, on the one side, a familiar world of mundane meanings and routine encounters, a hammer and saw, a button and switch, a mix together and assemble world, a

pound and shilling and a buy and sell world, a Monday through Friday world -- a perfectly ordinary, everyday world. That, on the one side; but there is also another.

Cached within the self-contained shell of industrial affluence of power, and of seemingly settled meaning, there is another, inner world -- a not-enough world. We may glimpse it in some of the comments made: this not-enough world, says the toolmaker, is 'the fundamentally alien world of machines.....'. It is, remarks the town planner, a world of 'interest and energy evaporated'; it is also, asserts the storeman, a place where there is a lack of 'those things that make men human -- a certain dignity, a measure of equality and above all ... self-respect'. For many in modern industrial society, for the member of parliament no less than the coal-miner, the world of work then is one of human insufficiency or of downright failure in the midst of technological triumph, of personal confusion in the midst of detailed organizational blueprints. Men's resistance to work is ingenious and ancient and the complaints about it are familiar and traditional. Yet in reading these reports I also thought I detected the emergence of a somewhat new sound, the still muffled sound of a slow and steady leak in the well-engineered world of work; an emerging awareness that work, as many know it, is nothing less than the wasting of life."

#### Attitudes

Work is at the core of life. Consider the deeper meanings of work to the individual and to life values: Work means being a good provider, it means autonomy, it pays off in success, and it establishes self-respect or self-worth. Within this framework, the person who openly confesses active job dissatisfaction

is virtually admitting failure as a man, and failure in fulfilling his moral role in society.

Since work resides at the very core of life values, self-esteem colors the response to job satisfaction attitude surveys. A negative answer may negate the life style and threaten the very ego of the individual. It may well involve a painful, if not impossible, denial of basic goals in life. It is tantamount to an admission of an inability to achieve and perform an economic, useful and productive role in society, in the family, in the church, and in the community.

By contrast the "satisfied" response is a confirmation of some measure of success in the real world of work. It reflects a self-image of one's place in the competitive, materialistic society of today. It confirms personal adaptability and adjustment to reality and the inner sense of doing as well as can be expected, considering the difficulty of finding and holding a job. The high proportion of satisfied workers in America (77%) is a measure of their economic self-esteem. It also confirms their adaptability and capacity to "fit-in," to adjust themselves and their expectations to the relatively rigid requirements of the workplace. It is a measure of man's capacity to accept the commonplace demands of life, especially the endless demands of the job. It is also a reflection of the low-level of expectations of many workers.

#### Expectations

The American worker has a high threshold of tolerance for his occupational world. Frustrations and sacrifices, long hours of unpleasant conditions, nagging supervision, dull, boring work, are all taken in stride. The American

adult accepts with equanimity the need to sacrifice in order to succeed as a full-time, paid employee who exchanges his labor for income to provide for himself and his family. Workers have been inculcated from early childhood, not only with the work ethic, but with the expectations that work is hard, involves sacrifice, and does not equate with pleasure or personal fulfillment. The rising expectations and aspirations of the new entrants into the labor market may change this long-term accommodation as more people expect more from work.

Expectations for satisfaction (plus income) from work are relatively low, except for the younger workers. This has a negative effect upon output, quality and overall efficiency. The older workers have tempered their expectations by seeking a full release from work through earlier and better pensions. However, the double digit inflation of the mid-70's will create a new economic barrier for early retirees facing devalued pensions and lower living standards. Of course, expectations rise and fall with the business cycle. In times of full employment, turnover rises and workers demand more -- usually in pay and benefits. During recessions and high unemployment, workers draw into their shells and lower their expectations. We are entering such a period now, further complicated by unprecedented inflation outside of the experience of most workers.

As long as these expectations remain low and encased in a mold of self-sacrifice, the work place will remain immutable. The economic commitment to products and profits exceeds any commitment to human needs. People continue to accommodate to jobs that are relatively inflexible and locked into a larger total system. The world of work remains unchanged in a changing world. The

typical worker seems unable to do anything about it. The typical union is uncertain what it could do if it tried. Employers are content to perform an effective economic role placing capital and technology ahead of human relations.

#### Economic Aspects

Wages have advanced at a good clip. The minimum wage initially fixed at 25¢ is moving toward \$2.00 per hour. Average total private wages are near \$4 per hour. In addition, a panoply of benefits have evolved since 1947 with the breakthrough of pension bargaining. Thus the work place provides varying degrees of: vacations, holidays, other time off with pay, health insurance, life insurance, severance pay, supplemental unemployment benefits, and pensions. These average about 25% of payroll and bring the hourly labor cost to \$5 per hour.

Employment benefit plans have grown tremendously since 1950. The number of persons included in hospital insurance, life insurance, and retirement plans has tripled. Coverage under surgical, regular medical and major-medical expense plans has expanded at an even greater pace. These long-run gains are further accentuated when the number of workers covered is related to the total labor force. The proportion of employed civilian wage and salary force with some type of health insurance through the place of employment expanded from 50 to 80%. The percent with group life insurance and death benefits increased from 40 to almost 70%. Private retirement plans cover nearly 50% of the private work force, more than double the proportion for 1950.

Despite these impressive statistics, under existing institutional structure, a sizeable portion of the labor force faces substantial barriers in obtaining these basic protections through their place of employment. For private retirement and temporary disability plans, the coverage gap remains quite large.

Whereas 50% are covered by private pension plans less than half of these ever draw a benefit. The other half of the labor force are without any private pension plan coverage, real or illusory. These facts assist us in maintaining a sense of proportion.

This growth of money wages and related benefits has taken place within a system of hourly pay without major adoption of incentive systems or profit sharing programs. The wage earner is controlled by the time clock, not by his product or by the inherent continuity of his effort. The occupational shift to service and government employment and the expansion of white-collar and professional work has spread more security of income by use of payment by the week, month or year. But the class distinctions in pay systems continue to prevail. Furthermore, work is rarely a process of group participation with a clear relationship between results and rewards. Usually, it is individual hire -- pay for the job -- without direct linkage to costs, profits or productivity. Even bonus plans are related to salary levels rather than individual efficiency.

We cannot ignore the fact that millions of Americans are working full-time, full-year and earning less than the poverty level for a family of four. These people labelled as the "working poor" have no economic satisfaction from work. They have no benefits, leisure, or security. In the South about one-fourth of the total labor force earns less than \$2 per hour. Another 4½ million people are unemployed and unable to find a job.

At the other extreme blue-collar workers are attaining annual incomes between \$15,000 - \$20,000 and have become part of Middle America. Therefore, the economic achievements for American workers are diverse, incomplete and cannot be exalted without serious qualification. Today these economic gains are being assaulted by inflation which has already reduced the real living standard by 5%.

### Psychic Needs

Man does not live by bread alone. Even executives and professionals have confessed to serious job dissatisfactions despite salaries in six figures. Every worker wants some dignity in the job he does, some self-respect, a reasonable degree of status and a sense of self-worth.

Since men and women are capable of rational thought, since they are trained, educated and able to learn at all ages, and since they are subject to many pressures to succeed, they aspire for more.

Work with dignity has not been defined as a human right. Work without dignity becomes degrading and mean. It imposes serious emotional penalties. Workers are not numbers on the time clock or in the computer. They want to apply their knowledge, they desire to use their physical and mental talents, they want to be treated as people at least equal to, if not above, the process of production. Emery and Thorsrud have defined an excellent list of the desirable components of jobs:

1. The need for the content of a job to be reasonably demanding of the worker in terms other than sheer endurance, and yet to provide a minimum of variety (not necessarily novelty);
2. the need to be able to learn on the job and to go on learning -- again it is a question of neither too much nor too little;
3. the need for some minimal area of decision-making that the individual can call his own;
4. the need for some minimal degree of social support and recognition in the workplace;
5. The need for the individual to be able to relate what he does and what he produces to his social life;



6. the need to feel that the job leads to some sort of desirable future (not necessarily promotion).

### The Leisure Myth

Leisure for American workers is more myth than reality. Since 1947 gross average weekly hours in the private sector declined from 40.3 to 37.2 in 1972 -- a drop of three hours per week, or about 8%. This is a very slow decline, and hours have been quite stable the last five years. Inflation, taxes, high cost of education of children and other economic pressures have intervened to block any trade-off of income for leisure in terms of the work-week.

Flexitime, increased vacations, more holidays, the four-day week, voluntary overtime, and other rearrangements in the packaging of the work-week or the work-year are significant developments. But they should be distinguished from the theory of the leisure class.

### The Workplace

Society at large has been more open and responsive to change than has the workplace. Modifications have occurred in the institutions of marriage and the family, in sexual mores, and in the legal rights of youth. Public opinion has induced remarkable changes toward abortion, birth-control, pre-marital sex, "open" marriages, divorce, drug use, the 18-year old vote, homosexuality, pornography, women's liberation, and racial equality.

Contrast this with the workplace. Jobs themselves have hardly changed. Dr. Robert H. Guest recently revisited and wrote "The Man on the Assembly Line - A Generation Later" and drew the overall conclusion that expressed dissatisfactions and the intensity of these dissatisfactions are the same today as in

1949. Customs and practices resist change. The organizational hierarchy persists, communication moves through formal channels, participation is limited or non-existent, opportunity for self-expression is often counter-productive, and conformity by employees is required. Recent concessions to dress and hair styles are surface masks that only convey an aura of permissiveness. They conceal the immutable nature of the relationship between a man and his job.

The world of work remains in stark contrast to the world away from work. Particularly today, society is in ferment. Self-fulfillment and a new attitude toward nature and self is emerging -- and not only among youth or women. Society itself has become more tolerant and permissive without any apparent shock to its growth or survival. Only the workplace remains unchanged in a changing world.

Prof. Goullder delineates a new concept of the "unemployed self."

"..... The individual learns what the system requires; he learns which parts of himself are unwanted and unworthy; he comes to organize his self and personality in conformity with the operating standards of utility, and therefore minimizes his costs of participating in such a system. In short, vast parts of any personality must be suppressed or repressed in the course of playing a role in industrial society. All that a man is that is not useful will somehow be excluded, or at least not be allowed to intrude, and he thereby becomes alienated or estranged from a large sector of his own interests, needs and capacities. Thus, just as there are unemployed men, there is also the unemployed self. Here, then, in the exclusions of self fostered by an industrial system oriented

towards utility, is a fundamental source of the sense of a life wasted which is so pervasive, even if muffled, in an industrial society. For the excluded self, while muffled, is not voiceless and makes its protest heard. That it also takes its revenge upon its betrayer is illustrated, with sad but poetic justice, in the personal life of the ascetic prophet of time and motion studies, F. W. Taylor, who spent his days creating a hellish efficiency and who spent his nights propped up, perpetually stricken with insomnia and nightmares."

The emerging confrontation between the worker and his job is more than a psychic demand. It is an issue of major economic significance to the individual firm, to entire industries, and to the economy as a whole. Worker attitudes and adjustments to the workplace have a direct bearing upon productivity, costs, quality of product, profitability and competitiveness in the world markets.

Serious problems in labor relations and personnel performance can be traced to the quality of working life, as distinguished from direct wages and benefits. Absenteeism, turnover, grievances and strikes are indicators of the surface abrasiveness of the workplace. Poor product quality, growing customer dissatisfaction, wasted materials, and climbing unit labor costs are other evidences of serious friction between employees and their environment at work.

The employer is not required to establish a happy workplace. He is motivated to create and maintain a productive workplace. Thus the balance between people and production requires a more sensitive interest in human relations. The notion that people work only for money and seek their real

satisfactions away from work is not valid. People have real needs at the workplace and the more these are satisfied, the greater their personal involvement and motivation to participate at their highest levels of achievement.

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