

QUALITY OF WORKING LIFE  
WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT STAGNATION ON THE JOB?

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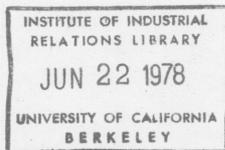
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## What Can We Do About Stagnation on the Job

Before 1972 and the publication of Work in America, it was unthinkable that any public discussion would take place about the quality of working life. Since then numerous books and speeches have appeared, and considerable controversy has arisen on whether Americans are satisfied with their jobs and whether they want a higher quality of life at the workplace. The controversy has many managers and union leaders agreeing that jobs are designed as well as they can be and that the issues are simply having jobs -- any jobs -- and that high pay will cure dissatisfaction.

Studs Terkel in Working gives us some insights into the stagnation and stifling effects of present work lives. Barbara Garson in some insightful articles gets us closer to life at the workplace. In her new book All the Livelong Day: The Meaning and Demeaning of Routine Work (1975), she spent two years talking to workers and occasionally watching them as they worked at tasks from which all significance had deliberately been stripped: men stacking ping pong paddles in boxes, women separating fish by color and so on. "How do you keep doing it all day?" she asked a man in a lumber mill. "It's easy" he answered. "You just blank your mind." How wide spread is mind blanking across the U.S. and what is the incalculable loss to the nation of the commitment and contribution of millions stagnating on the job -- or retired in the job. To this must be added the loss from frustrated ambition and limited lives.

What can be done about stagnation on the job? What is to be done depends on where the sources of stagnation are seen to be. As if in defense of the horrible jobs provided, stagnation has been laid at the feet of the job holder. Overlooking the lack of opportunity provided, workers and now some professionals, are seen as topping out, lacking ambition, becoming obsolete, etc.

If on the other hand stagnation on the job is seen as largely organizationally and societally induced and only partially individually related then there are many paths that can be followed. None, however, will be easy to implement given the widespread conventional structure

of organizations and jobs plus the limited expectations now existing among most job holders. Before any of the approaches that organizations can take will be accepted as genuine some commitments have to become visible to their members. They require evidence that there are possibilities and that engaging and putting forth the effort required to change will be worthwhile.

To provide the basis for instituting programs for dealing with stagnation on the job, organizations must be committed to providing jobs and work that satisfy the following needs of those who work.

1. The need for the content of the work to be reasonably demanding in terms other than sheer endurance, yet providing a minimum of variety (not necessarily novelty).
2. The need to be able to learn on the job and go on learning which requires standards and knowledge of results.
3. The need for some area of decision making that an individual can call one's own where one can exercise one's own discretion.
4. The need for social support in the workplace, i.e., the need for an individual to know that one can rely on others for help needed in performing the job as well as for sympathy and understanding.
5. The need for an individual to have recognition within the organization for one's performance and contributions.
6. The need for an individual to be able to relate what one does and what one produces to one's social life.
7. The need to feel that the job leads to some sort of desirable future.

The easiest program to try, and often the least effective, is job rotation. Job rotation has a very mixed record. In its best application job rotation provides opportunities to learn different jobs and advance to more attractive jobs better matched to talents, and expectations. In its worst application, people with boring dead end jobs are rotated into other boring dead end jobs on the assumption that variety may in itself be helpful in dealing with stagnation.

A more effective program, which still does not change the basic structure of jobs, is to add activities essential to the organization to the duties of the job. Sometimes this is done informally as ad hoc

assignments and at other times by appointment to formal improvement committees, quality committees etc. In some organizations such committees are established cooperatively or jointly between managements and unions. Such assignments provide opportunities to expand the capabilities of people, providing learnings and use of wide abilities people bring to their employment. Such programs require the prior building of a base of cooperation for such participation. They require much more extensive sharing by management with workers of the problems of maintaining the organization.

Other and more difficult programs to institute provide greater opportunities to overcome or avoid stagnation. The more likely a program is to overcome stagnation the more difficult it is to implement or maintain. Among these are designs of organizations using work teams with minimum or no barriers among a team's jobs. Individuals then can learn each other's jobs as part on carrying on the work of a team. The impediments here are existing organization structures, personnel practices and sometimes union-management contracts.

Another approach is that of organizational changes requiring multi-skilled jobs so that an individual or group can become associated with a whole process, function or a product. Again here there are substantial barriers to application.

Lastly, the above programs are likely to succeed in overcoming stagnation only infrequently unless three other requirements are satisfied. These are developing career paths with obtainable stages, counselling individuals about opportunities available and about how to fulfill them, and lastly the development of payment or reward systems that reinforce learning by rewarding the acquisition of more skills and knowledge. An illustration of the latter are payment systems that are based on knowledge, skills and competence rather than on specific tasks performed. Of course, this is how managers and professionals are paid.

In a recent extensive study of career perceptions of white collar civil servants done at our Center, those jobs were highly valued that provided opportunities to advance, to develop oneself, or to learn and expand one's capabilities depending on the life path the individual had chosen. Careers were seen to be in the grip of the organization so that satisfaction or apathy and career development or stagnation was as

much a matter of choosing the organization for which to work as choosing the job. Stagnation on the job, stunted development, and frustrated careers have to be seen as resting largely with organizations and how they are structured and managed. Individuals will respond with very few exceptions, when real and attainable opportunities are made available to them.

As the only University based Center for the Quality of Working Life we welcome your inquiries about research and practice and welcome opportunities to work with your organizations in efforts to enhance the quality of life in the workplace and thus avoid among other disabilities, stagnation on the job.