

What Employers Want

As we enter the twenty-first century, Americans sense that we are moving toward a new world of work. As symbol of the emergent workplace reigns the computer, pervasive if not ubiquitous, with the revolution engendered by the microchip likely to entail both promise and peril. Total liberation from the drudgework of the industrial era may not be at hand, but automation is freeing human labor from the difficult, dangerous, and tedious tasks associated with the factory. Production is increasingly the domain of highly educated workers equipped with the technical skills needed to master and control the new technology; blue collars are passé. Manufacturing no longer occupies the economic centrality it once possessed—weakening the broader influence of its cultural patterns and skill needs. Because the service economy depends on the creation, transmission, and consumption of information and images, the demand for educated labor grows. As the skills of the labor force deepen, so grows the likelihood that work will involve a fuller use of human potential.

Thus, farewell to the factory, but not without regrets. With demand for less-skilled labor declining, academic commentators and vulnerable factory workers wonder where the millions of less educated workers will go. All may be well in the long run, as the economists assure us, but it is a long road from now to then. In the short run, workers are generally stuck with the skills they have: the forty-year-old worker who dropped out of high school at age eighteen enjoys little prospect of making up for his or her educational deficiencies. Moreover, the proficiencies learned

over many years, that once garnered a decent wage, are likely to prove of little use when the factory downsizes or closes. Younger workers may be hearing the message that extensive formal schooling is a must, but the signal seems not to be coming across too clearly; there has been no sudden leap in college enrollment corresponding to the increased demand for college-educated labor. Thus, the low-skilled worker has crossed the threshold into the twenty-first century in big trouble, with wages down and employment uncertainty up.¹ By the time we moved past the turn of the century, the longest peacetime boom in U.S. history had finally pushed real hourly wages up at all levels of the labor market—but the increase came late, proved slight, and produced no increase in job security.

The emergent labor market increasingly has room only for the highly skilled, and nowhere more so than in the great metropolitan areas of the United States. The city of information and services has largely replaced the city of production, leading our most prominent analysts of urban trends to worry about a mismatch between the skills of urban residents and the requirements of urban employers. Minority city dwellers, in particular, simply do not seem to possess what employers want.

But something strange is going on in these very places that are apparently hurtling toward the computerized, skill-intensive work world of tomorrow; they are hosting a massive infusion of workers from outside the country, workers whose education is even more deficient than that of vulnerable U.S. -born workers who never continued beyond high school. Even more peculiar is the immigrants' experience; poorly schooled, unfamiliar with American ways, and lacking in English fluency, they are nonetheless finding work and maintaining remarkably high employment rates.² Granted, the advent of the newcomers is not totally mysterious; no one has yet figured out how to dispense with dishwashers and sweepers. But the immigrant presence in America's urban economies has spilled far beyond this small cluster of manual positions, as more and more employers have discovered the virtues of hiring the foreign-born, employing them over a steadily widening spectrum of jobs.

So the continuing immigrant arrival provides good reason to re-examine our assumptions about today's "new" world of work. There is something painfully familiar about today's image of the emerging flexible, high-skilled workplace and its polyvalent worker—we have heard it all before. In the 1950s and 1960s, the optimists in the social science fraternity (as it truly was, then) offered much the same view. They contended that the "logic of industrialization" would inevitably transform

all societies, with capital-intensive production eventually replacing the hard, dirty, undesirable jobs that industry then had to offer.³ In sociology, Robert Blauner chimed in with the view that technological shifts were pushing job skills along a U-shaped trajectory. In the not-so-distant past, highly skilled, highly satisfying jobs associated with craft production prevailed; job requirements then tumbled, under the reign of the mind- and spirit-numbing jobs of the Taylorized assembly line. In the second half of the twentieth century, Blauner forecast, the advent of continuous-process work, requiring teams of workers to act creatively when the automated system inevitably crashed, would begin to push skill levels and related job satisfactions back up the curve,⁴ Slightly later, Daniel Bell, having previously announced the end of ideology, proclaimed “the coming of post-industrial society,” a shift signaled by the growing importance of knowledge for economic growth, which in turn reflected a basic change in the nature of work. “The fact that individuals now talk to other individuals, rather than interact with a machine,” intoned Bell, “is the fundamental fact about work in the post-industrial society.”⁵ Thus, contemporary arguments that the computer will deliver us from the routine, mundane activities of production and service represent the latest variation on an old theme.

Unfortunately, this perspective suffers from a recurrent inability to make sense of a salient aspect of the reality it purports to interpret: the arrival of successive waves of low-skilled migrant labor—often directly recruited—to fill jobs that, from this perspective, should not even exist. The 1950s, the intellectual heyday for the proponents of “industrial society” and the moment when America underwent its first “automation scare,” came towards the tail end of the Great Migration,⁶ with millions of displaced African-American sharecroppers still trekking to Northern industrial cities in search of work; with little in the way of education or marketable skills, African American migrants were still able to readily find jobs (even if those jobs were barely worth writing home about). Europe witnessed the same trend in the 1960s, with the massive recruitment of “guest workers” from increasingly distant locales. Like African Americans, these workers had the intolerable effrontery of not returning home when, in the mid-1970s, the great European industrial machine no longer hungered for their labor power. In the United States, where the economy has undergone wrenching transformations over the past three decades, immigrant flows have been simultaneously, and steadily, on the rise. Barring major changes in immigration policy, we can expect that roughly 800,000 legal immigrants will continue arriving each year for

the foreseeable future. Evidently, the ever-advancing capitalist societies of the turn of the twenty-first century cannot do without immigrant labor. Setting aside for the moment the question of *why* late capitalism requires an immigrant labor fix, we must ask a more basic question: How is it that less-skilled immigrants find *any* place in the new world of work?

SKILLS: UPGRADED, DOWNGRADED, PERSISTENT

We begin by noting that the conventional view goes wrong, in part, because it ignores a more complex reality. Optimistic portrayals of the upgrading workplace have the character of “future schlock” because they ignore an opposing counter-tendency; capitalism’s dynamism has a deeply destructive component, one day breaking down skills it created just the day before. Indeed, the application of computerized technology creates new niches, often initially filled with jobs that require highly skilled, semi-autonomous workers. Yet, if the pace of technological changes slows down, the jobs become standardized and the skills degraded; one only need glance at the cash register in a MacDonald’s fast food restaurant to see the power of computers to “dumb down” work.

The argument that capitalism progresses by deskilling derives from Marx, and has been transported to the contemporary social sciences by a particularly successful modern exponent, Harry Braverman. According to Braverman, deskilling has derived from the fundamental opposition of labor and capital. The search for profits led the latter to unceasing efforts to gain command over the former. Capitalists pursued control through mechanization, through the transference of knowledge from labor to capital and its agents, and through ever more successful efforts at surveillance and monitoring—all with the aim of greater control over the exercise of labor power. As a corrective to the one-dimensional, excessively optimistic portrayals of technological progress, Braverman packed considerable punch; by its very nature, capitalism has continued reproducing the working class, on whose elimination the hopes of the prophets of “industrial” and “post-industrial” society rested. Put bluntly, Braverman observed that the normal functioning of capitalism produced plenty of crummy jobs, a statement no less true today than a generation ago, when he first wrote.⁷

Unlike mainstream analysts, Braverman was not willing to equate educational credentials and official certifications with “real” skills. In his view, credentials serve other important purposes: sending employers signals about a job candidate’s personal qualities (as economists are wont to note),⁸ and raising artificially high barriers to entry (as sociologists are

more likely to point out).⁹ More generally, it is one thing to observe that today's workers are better educated than yesterday's, quite another to show that today's workers are more highly skilled. The skills required by the job were, for Braverman, an empirical question, one likely to be influenced, if not decided, by the incessant pressures to reduce labor costs by reducing skills and by transferring control from labor to management. Clearly, the relationship between a worker's formal education and the skills required by the job was not, in his view, to be taken at face value; skepticism was particularly warranted when regarding the lower end of the labor market, where the undeniable upgrading in the educational attainment of workers hardly precluded the possibility that the actual proficiencies demanded by the employer remained unaltered or had even decreased.

Braverman's writings swept the field, at least among sociologists of work. As they pursued his leads, however, they realized he had gone too far.¹⁰ On one hand, Braverman simply misread the underlying direction of change; right as he was about capitalism's destructive impulses, he failed to appreciate its creative tendency, all the more marked in a time of stepped-up technological change. As we now know from a large literature of strategic case studies and from analyses of larger-scale data sets, job requirements are, *on average*, heading upward.¹¹ In contrast to the futuristic scenarios periodically embraced by social scientists, most experts now acknowledge that there is nothing inevitable or unidirectional about skill enhancement. There are changes in both directions—*up*-grading and *de*-skilling.¹² Moreover, technology has no determinate impact on skill; an innovation that at one stage increases job proficiencies may be later altered so as to greatly reduce skill demands. The advent of the computer, its widespread application, and its effect on the acceleration of the product cycle have made cognitive skills increasingly important and salient for many classes of workers. But the effect is more modest than most think: skill deepening takes place, but its effects so far are relatively limited.¹³ In other words, the revolution has been postponed; capitalism still needs its *proles*.

Braverman's other mistake involved accepting management's own propaganda at face value, especially as regards its success in deskilling. What management says and what workers do, Braverman forgot, are two different things. Because the fundamental ethnomethodological insight applies—the most basic forms of human interaction are subject to breakdown, misinterpretation, conflict—almost all jobs contain an ineradicable component of skill.¹⁴ Following Marx, as forgotten by Braverman, moreover, workers have reason to hide their knowledge of

everyday tricks from the bosses.¹⁵ As Ken Kusterer argued in one of the earliest critiques of Braverman from the left, quotation marks belong around the word “unskilled”; almost all work situations involve unpredictability and uncertainty; the skills required to handle the unanticipated are something that management cannot eliminate, no matter how hard it tries.¹⁶ On the other hand, the fact that workers are willing to use their everyday know-how *because* they want to get the work done—contra Marx—often gives management less reason to reorganize work in ways that would require even fewer skills.¹⁷ Rephrased in more pertinent terms, work at the bottom of the labor market may require little formal education, but it nonetheless involves job-related proficiencies of significant degree.

LABOR MARKET SEGMENTATION

Thus, creatively destructive, capitalism maintains its pool of less-skilled though hardly skill-less jobs. But it departs from the trajectory of unilinear development, forecast by the prophets of industrial or post-industrial society, in yet another way. Instability is the bane of market economies, and its producers attempt to shelter themselves from its effects in any number of ways. Firms look for ways to capture a market or as much of a business line as they can. Workers try to build in protection against the vagaries of the business cycle, making it hard for firms to sack them, or forcing employers to heavily cushion the costs of the unemployment they periodically create. However, stability is an option only for some. Firms are willing to tie up capital, and their most valuable labor, in those parts of the production process least susceptible to fluctuation. In reaction to workers' successful efforts to stabilize employment, making labor a fixed—and high—cost, firms with internal labor markets become reluctant to engage new help. Rather than scaling up when demand grows, they “source out,” using contractors to absorb the least stable portion of demand. For some firms (including the contractors engaged to handle the unstable part of demand), the nature of the market they face—its small size, the uncertainty of demand, the proliferation of small producers—prevents internalization. Those organizations least sheltered from the forces of competition and most subjected to the vagaries of the market find themselves without the certainty needed to make long-term investments in workers' skills, and starved of the profits needed for wages that would attract a high-quality, strongly attached workforce.

Thus, the labor market divides into segments; of these, there are more than a few taxonomies. The best known, most influential perspective, associated with Michael Piore, emphasizes the difference between *primary* and *secondary* labor market segments. The former is a reserve of higher-wage, relatively stable jobs, where workers progress and learn skills through movement up an elaborated job ladder; the latter consists of organizations that recruit workers from the external labor market and place them in poorly paid positions with limited opportunities for upward mobility.¹⁸ Piore's dualist model seems less applicable to the economy of the turn of the twenty-first century than it was for the postwar, still-Fordist economy, which it originally served to describe.¹⁹ Recent modifications to the model point to additional lines of segmentation, taking note of industrial, salaried, and craft faultlines within Piore's primary labor market segment. Still, the key insights of the segmentation approach continue to illuminate. First, job characteristics co-vary, as Chris and Charles Tilly argue, so that well-paying jobs offer opportunities for on-the-job training and less onerous supervision, and low pay is correlated with frequent supervision, work repetitiveness, and perceived risk of job loss.²⁰ Second, easy movement from one cluster of jobs to another is impeded, because each segment develops its own institutional practices, attaching to networks that include members of a particular "club" and exclude all others.²¹ Thus, to each segment its own labor force. Because the jobs in the secondary sector are the least attractive, and since capitalism's dynamism regularly leads it to exhaust the available pool of labor, vacancies at the bottom of the totem pole recurrently emerge. And so opens a portal of entry to immigrants, who however poorly educated or unskilled in the conventional sense, nonetheless turn out to be wanted.²²

The Importance of Being Secondary

In this book, our area of concern lies within the secondary sector of the labor market, although not the secondary sector as conventionally depicted. In that image, the secondary labor market serves as a concentration of jobs requiring minimal skills, the nature of which can be apprehended by almost anyone, with little pain. Our objection to this conventional view echoes our criticism of Braverman's depiction of deskilling: it simply goes too far. At the base of the labor market one can find positions that just about anyone can fill. However, as we argued earlier, ethnomethodological competence is required for any job;²³ in most secondary jobs the demand for proficiency is higher still. Organi-

zations may be small, working with outdated technology, using managerial methods harsher and more dictatorial than the modern personnel handbook prescribes; notwithstanding, the inherent unpredictability and uncertainty of the work makes competence of a non-trivial sort imperative.²⁴ And for a variety of reasons, the necessary know-how is almost always learned on the job: the skills are industry- or occupation-specific; few external agencies provide the necessary training; and the available workers either lack meaningful formal training or possess certificates that contain no signaling value.²⁵

This revised view of the secondary labor market needs to be placed alongside another view emphasized throughout this book: migration is a network-driven phenomenon. As Piore saw it, the secondary labor market is a world without structure, its immigrant workers lacking durable social relationships, living and working in a context where they are “divorced from a social setting.”²⁶ As we show in greater detail shortly, the work environment of the immigrants takes exactly the opposite form; newcomers are linked by dense, cohesive connections to veterans, who in turn use their inside information to secure openings for their key associates. As discussed in part 3 of this volume, immigrant networks work so powerfully because they also serve employers’ ends, increasing the likelihood that a new hire, recruited through informal channels, will turn out a stable, productive worker. Even at the bottom of the labor market, employers are concerned *and* uncertain about a new applicant’s potential to produce. The needed skills are acquired on the job, through training; training entails investment, which employers are loathe to make, absent assurances about a worker’s native ability and reliability. Since fitting in with the group facilitates learning, the employer has good reasons to prefer workers who resemble the incumbents who will teach them. This preference spells bad news for potential workers without connections, or for workers who comprise a small minority in industries or occupations dominated by some other group. It yields good news, however, for the numerically dominant group, since a chance to learn on the job in one firm can lead to upward mobility, through movement to another firm. This option counts heavily in the secondary sector, where most organizations are small and job ladders are short or non-existent, making inter-firm movement a must for the ambitious worker.

SUBORDINATES WANTED

Before proceeding, we note that there is an entire tier of jobs to which the commonsense concept of skill applies awkwardly, if at all. As the

Oxford English Dictionary defines it, “skill” involves the “capability of accomplishing something with precision and certainty; practical knowledge in combination with ability; cleverness, expertness; an ability to perform a function, acquired or learnt with practice.” The jobs of interactive service, such as that between sales clerks and customers, often require qualities of an entirely different kind; while they frequently entail pushing, doing, manipulating, transforming, these actions do not lie at the core of the job. Workers who “work on people” have an additional, overriding objective, that of manipulating the self to create a feeling of contentment in the recipient of the service, as Arlie Hochschild has most eloquently explained.²⁷

In Hochschild’s account, working on people, as opposed to working with things, used to be correlated with class; those in the middle-class or above gravitated to the former, while persons of working- or lower-class background were typically confined to the latter. The demands entailed in working on people are not necessarily trivial. The interactive-service worker needs to alter his or her behavior in just the way that will lead the customer to respond as desired; she or he must know how to respond to subtle cues, and is expected to have the sensitivity to adjust to changing, unpredictable situations. These tasks require skills not imparted by school: the ability to smile, to present a friendly, personable self, and to control one’s feelings so that the customer will be pleased. Put differently, the effective interactive-service worker needs to maintain an appropriate presentation of self. In the terms used by employers, the demands entailed in presenting the right front (if not *self*) make “attitude” count as much as, if not more than, “skill.”²⁸

However, the successful interactive-service worker requires yet another trait that Hochschild, like most students of so-called “emotional labor,” somehow ignores. The word *service*, after all, implies a *servant* and there is no servant without a master who needs to be pleased. Not every job of interactive service reenacts the master-servant relationship; the jobs vary greatly in the degree to which subordination to the customer is an essential component. But as one moves down the occupational totem pole towards the jobs with which we are concerned, it becomes more important that the server know his or her place. The lower-level service jobs bear a strong resemblance to domestic labor, from which they are descended, a resemblance signaled by the symbols of service work and by its codes of interaction.²⁹ Today’s interactive-service worker shares more than a little with the household servant of old, wrapped in a uniform, wearing tags that display only his or her first

name, expected to address customers as *sir* or *madam*, shuttling from the shabby halls of the “back of the house” to the comfortable, if not luxurious, environs of the “front of the house.”³⁰ Consequently, one’s suitability (or willingness) to comply with the customary demands for subordination ranks high among the criteria that employers want. Skills, whether hard or soft, matter a good deal less.

In general, the best subordinates are those who know their place—a generalization that holds with particular force for the tasks and positions with which we are concerned. The job of interactive service requires inversion of the usual codes of interaction; the service provider’s task is to defer to the client, who is under no obligation to reciprocate, let alone acknowledge, behavior normally understood as kindness. True, the customer does not always “look through” the service provider, but many are the occasions when it may be better to pretend there is no one there. The messy hotel room, for example, would surely be more of an embarrassment were it to be cleaned by someone with a claim to equality. It is easier for all concerned if the dirty work is done by someone whose characteristics qualify him or her as a non-person, and can therefore be peacefully ignored.³¹ And where employers understand jobs to be demeaning, as our respondents often did, they have reasons to assign the task to a worker already unrespected. More difficult is recruiting someone whose personal status—for reasons of nativity, ethnicity, gender, age, or the like—does not fit with the job’s, and who may therefore feel entitled to something better. While the experienced boss is an expert in saying no, it is harder to do so with a clearly observable person to encounter—someone, indeed, resembling oneself—instead of an employee whose external traits allow complaints to be automatically dismissed.

Thus, jobs that require willing subordinates motivate employers to have recourse to immigrants. As we shall argue at greater length in chapters 9 and 10,³² bad jobs are likely to be seen as “best” for people already demeaned, especially in positions where the service expected contains the *servile* aspect associated with the servant role—for which persons brought up to value more egalitarian relationships at work are unlikely to be seen as the most willing recruits.³³ For the moment, we simply assert that employers have a cognitive map that leads them to associate ethnic and national traits with the qualities that make for subordination. Operating from a “theory” of immigrant labor, they perceive immigrants as workers distinctively characterized by a dual frame of reference, in which the evaluation of treatment in the host society is always assessed relative to treatment in the home society. In that view, strangers (unlike

the native) are not yet in the know, and not yet aware that the task and conditions of a job are stigmatizing and therefore something against which one should chafe. Understanding that “here” is likely to prove better for immigrants than “there” on most counts—pay, status of the job, type of work involved, or authority relationships at work—the employer is likely to see the immigrants as more accommodating, if not necessarily happier, workers than those “born in the U.S.A.”

LEARNING WHAT EMPLOYERS WANT

Even at the bottom of the labor market, the handicaps with which immigrants start represent no mean thing; the newcomers’ deficits in educational attainment, English language ability, and American cultural literacy are grounds for any employer to beware. But the immigrants may have some cards to play—most important, their connections to other immigrants who possess the working knowledge needed by secondary firms, and are ready to teach their kin, friends, and compatriots. Further, the dual frame of reference makes it easier for immigrants to produce the appropriate performance in workplaces where displays of subordination are de rigueur. In the following two chapters, we shall put empirical meat on these bones; we shall discuss what we have learned about what employers want and, as importantly, do *not* want. In doing so, we will see how the other half works.