



Blood, Sweat & Tears

The Evolution of Work

by Richard Donkin
Texere © 2001
320 pages

Focus

Leadership
Strategy
Sales & Marketing
Corporate Finance
Human Resources
Technology
Production & Logistics
Small Business
▶ **Economics & Politics**
Industries & Regions
Career Development
Personal Finance
Self Improvement
Ideas & Trends

Take-Aways

- The nature of work has changed dramatically over the centuries.
- Revolutionary shifts altered the way people work and live.
- Despite these changes, many attitudes and habits persist, due to social drag.
- Work has been influenced by many factors, including slavery, guilds, unions, trade secrets, religion, societal patterns, and especially economic ebbs and flows.
- Periodically throughout history, great skills have been lost, from architecture to crafts.
- In the early 1900s, carmaker Henry Ford attempted to eliminate human labor by using machines whenever possible.
- By the mid-1900s, societies modeled themselves after corporations, turning, essentially, into corporate states.
- The corporate executive rose in power, status and price in the 1950s.
- Management theory dominated the 20th century's approach to work.
- The current technological revolution changed work as drastically as the agrarian revolutions and the industrial revolution.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
8	3	9	10

Visit our website at www.getAbstract.com to purchase individual abstracts, personal subscriptions or corporate solutions. getAbstract is an Internet based knowledge rating service and publisher of book abstracts. Every week, subscribers are e-mailed a short abstract of a different business book. Each abstract contains an overview of essential ideas from the entire book. Excerpts from this book are reprinted here with the permission of the publisher. The respective copyrights of authors and publishers are acknowledged. All rights reserved. No part of this abstract may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, photocopying, or otherwise, without prior written permission of getAbstract Ltd (Switzerland).

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract you will learn: 1) The history of labor; 2) How the nature of work has changed through human history, and 3) How management theory and psychological study has influenced current workplace practices.

Recommendation

If you've ever wondered about how your workplace came to be as it is, or where the work ethic comes from, you'll love Richard Donkin's absorbing exploration of the history of work. From the caveman to the man in pinstripes, he covers it all in a journey that also includes plenty of wit and wisdom. Delving deeply into societies of every era, the book's strength lies in its context and insight. Donkin even provides a good "a-ha!" or two in each chapter, you know, those moments when you smile, nod and say, "Oh, so that's where that comes from." *getAbstract.com* highly recommends this book to all workers, from hunter-gatherers to CEOs.

Abstract

The Nature of Work

The nature of work has changed drastically over the centuries. Most changes have been the result of revolutionary shifts that also affected the way people live and behave. Three major watersheds dominate the evolution of work. The first was the agrarian revolution, when people abandoned their hunter-gather lifestyles and formed farming communities instead. The second was the industrial revolution, marked by the advent of working machines and the concentration of people in cities. The third is the current new technology revolution, and for a description of that, just look around you.

Despite such drastic catalysts, old habits and attitudes make societies resist change, a phenomenon called social drag. The strongest of such attitudes is the Protestant work ethic, which has its roots in the 16th-century English Puritanism. For centuries, this approach led to a make-work society in which values are distorted, and it still exists.

But that is not the only influence that affected our working world over time; the list is endless — stretching from slavery to medieval guilds, from the creation of trade secrets to the political and religious patterns set by early societies.

Job Creation

Periodically throughout history, great skills have been lost, even in medicine, a field most people think is now at its peak. Believe it or not, embalming will never again reach the peaks of sophistication attained about 1000 B.C. Modern day funeral directors can only look back in awe to the professional skills of the ancient Egyptian embalmers. Those embalmers were part of a professional elite that included builders, stonemasons and architects whose skills are considered superior to today's in many ways.

Skills diminish when a practice spreads out to a wider audience, as new practitioners enter the market and begin to compete on price, and quality and artistry take a nose-dive. This happened as often in ancient Rome as it does today, for example, in the field of

"It is as if the world has become split into two societies — one with the means to enjoy leisure but not the time, and one that has the time but not the means."

"We know from the Renaissance that when a particular talent, such as painting, is prized by a society, it can stimulate a cultural flowering in which skills and abilities are transferred across whole populations."

“Does work need a boss, a leader, some director of operations? Or can it simply happen, driven by need or desire or a spirit of cooperation?”

“The United States is witnessing the phenomenon of the working poor, people whose work provides them with insufficient income on which to live.”

“Once there was work, and what we understand as work was what we were paid to be doing. Today there is what we do, and sometimes the benefits to our employer of what we do is unclear.”

television programming: Quality only survives at the innovative fringe. The demands of the mass market reduce once proud industries to the lowest common denominator.

Job creation hasn't always left quality in the dust. In previous centuries, when workmen controlled their craft through guilds, they could resist those market forces that tended to erode good workmanship with incessant demands for cheaper, simpler, ready-made products. This resistance was possible because the workmen held the key to something precious — their skill — and it was jealously guarded.

Guilds were important in the evolution of work because they didn't just regulate the work, they also regulated the particular enterprise, keeping wages steady and maintaining standards so that commerce and trade wouldn't suffer from poor workmanship and cheating. In fact, such concerns for fairness gave rise to the practice of providing 13 of an item — the baker's dozen — when only a dozen had been ordered.

Craft skills were transferred from experts to apprentices because only a master of the craft can effectively communicate the muster of his or her talent. The word mystery is derived from the Latin word *misterium*, meaning “professional skill.”

The New World

As the New World embraced servitude and slavery, the Old World left such classifications behind. The French formally abolished serfdom and the feudal system in 1789. The newly created United States was poised to absorb the progressive ideas on economics outlined in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. All the elements for unprecedented economic growth were falling into place, except one. Not until the United States consigned slavery to history after the Civil War of the 1860's could it assume the moral ascendancy that would help to make it the most powerful and influential nation on the globe.

Car maker Henry Ford (1863-1947) said, “The working men have been exploited all the way up and down the line by employers, landlords, everybody.” Ford's automobile company introduced the assembly line and created modern production. The idea was to keep the workers in place and let the machinery do the moving. William Klann, one of Ford's engineers, got the idea from the Chicago meatpacking business. There, entire carcasses hung from a moving line while workers progressively butchered them as they moved along. “If they can kill pigs and cows that way, we can build cars that way,” Klann said.

Ford's first moving assembly line was installed in the spring of 1913, a drastic change for workers. At work, a person was rooted to the spot, performing the same limited task over and over, day after day. The employee came to work at a set time, he worked to a set pace that could be increased at the employer's will and, if he thought at all while working, it was of other things, far beyond the workplace.

This new form of working, dubbed Fordism, was an attempt to eliminate labor, where feasible, by using machines. Such a system was a blow to the human spirit. “That people could take pride in such an ‘achievement’ only confirms the way moral priorities were distorted by competitive industrialism. No wonder that these systems created distaste among intellectuals,” said one critic. Ford, however, did not agree. He envisioned himself as an emancipator, the visionary who could offer cars to the masses, not just the rich.

Teamwork and Motivation

Inventor Thomas Edison's Menlo Park Laboratory was a hive of industrious invention. His collaborators were craftsmen who called each other “muckers” because they all “mucked

“Why have great skills been lost periodically throughout history? There seems to be a conspiracy of obsolescence, usually involving a combination of common influences — fashion, innovation and price.”

“The laborer now seems as endangered a species as the blue whale.”

“In the information society, work can be invisible. How do you reward the employee who is ‘thinking’ over a work-related problem? Is this ‘thinking’ not work?”

in” or pitched in together. Trying to explain the informal, free-thinking atmosphere, Edison said, “Hell, there ain’t no rules in here! We’re trying to accomplish something!”

In their book, *Organizing Genius*, Warren Bennis and Patrica Ward Biederman note the power of Edison’s informal enthusiastic atmosphere when you are working with creative teams. They explain how members of such teams feed off each other. Examples of such productive behavior ranges from the animators who worked with Walt Disney to the nuclear physicists who worked with J. Robert Oppenheimer on the atomic bomb. Enthusiasm is the foundation behind the motivation of such creative individuals and teams.

During the 1800’s and early 1900’s, the field of occupational psychology was in its prolonged infancy. In the groundbreaking book, *Influencing Men in Business*, published in 1911, Dill Scott wrote, “The greatest business problems of our day have to do with the personnel of industry and the arts of guiding and influencing men in the application of psychology. It is only science that can give us any sound information about human nature.” These were very bold statements for the time, when great progress first was being made in psychological testing in Germany, Britain, France and the United States.

The Corporate State

In his 1943 book, *The Future of Industrial Man*, Peter Drucker astutely suggested that the workings of large corporations were becoming the organizational model for the whole of society, in effect, a corporate state. Throughout the 20th century, management theories of all kinds fought for the spotlight as they continue to do. Academic institutions ventured into corporations, as researchers tackled every conceivable work or workplace issue.

World War II signaled a major change in who worked and where. When men left their full-time jobs to enter the armed forces, women filled the jobs. By the end of the war, obviously, women had done men’s work and had done it well. After the war, many women went back to their old way of life, but the door remained open to women who, over the coming decades, finally found that they had the opportunity to compete in the workplace in an ever-widening array of professions.

The workplace itself changed after World War II. While unions in the U.S. were still at odds — as usual — with management, the balance now leaned toward managers who were getting the upper hand in the top-heavy, divisional style of command. Management became a new science, in effect, in all industrialized nations. The system operated on an arrogant and intellectually wasteful assumption that demanded knowledge and initiative from only one small section of the workforce — the managerial class.

Management practices were based on the idea of worker efficiency. Economies were strengthening and many countries were reaching nearly full employment in what some would later call a golden age of productivity. The post-war society became a consumer society as families began to enjoy more leisure time, to buy cars, televisions and homes, and to take vacations. The corporate executive rose in power, status and price in the 1950s. Through the 1960s, the corporate world viewed itself as if it was on a mission. Capitalism was, after all, engaged in an economic war to the death against those nations that believed socialism, combined with economic planning, was a fairer system, one that redistributed wealth across society rather than concentrating profits among a wealthy elite.

“Work has run out of kilter. It is messing up our lives.”

“Stone Age society was witnessing the emergence of industrial man.”

Another element entered the corporate structure — happiness. Researchers noted that people’s self-worth and happiness could be tied to their jobs. The concept was nothing short of revolutionary when it surfaced in the late 1920s. By the end of the 20th century, corporations created human resources programs to focus on employees’ emotional well being.

The Technology Revolution

Peter Drucker once cautioned that, “So much of what we call management consists of making it difficult for people to work.” By the 1990s, the fundamental power base in most companies had not changed, and top management was still male-dominated. Then new dot-com companies injected informality into the corporate culture. These companies provided the corporate venue where women finally broke beyond the glass ceiling by riding the entrepreneurial escalator to the top.

By 2000, the computer had become the dominant piece of equipment in nearly every office. Communicating via e-mail supplemented, and often replaced, other forms of business interactions. Yet, despite the technological revolution, not much has changed yet for assembly workers tied to their workbenches or for those in all businesses who find themselves the victims of the latest management theories, as lampooned in *Dilbert*.

The workaholic had become the norm by 2000, and not necessarily by choice. Death from overwork is not uncommon among Japanese employers. They even have a word for it — *Kaoroshi*. Western employers often persist in encouraging the kind of overwork that has become epidemic in Japan. Now, with e-mail and hand-held communication gadgets, the workplace literally can follow people home.

When the Internet bubble burst, it didn’t just surprise many people in the business community, it also surprised every 15-year-old schoolboy who wanted a Web site that would serve him instant millions. That Internet bubble had all the characteristics of previous waves of financial euphoria. In fact, Internet stocks were being unrealistically valued in much the same speculative way that, once long ago, the Dutch valued tulip bulbs.

About The Author

Richard Donkin is a leading columnist and writer for the *Financial Times*, a newspaper specializing in work and management topics. He regularly appears on radio and contributed to other leading magazines on issues relating to business.

Buzz-Words

Corporate state / Job creation / **Kaoroshi** / Social drag