

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RJB-17  
A Day At The Conferences

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535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

I attended a three day conference on the Quality of Work in America which was sponsored by the Urban Research Corporation in cooperation with Monsanto Chemical Company, Texas Instruments, and Travelers Insurance Company. The conference was open to anyone willing to pay the \$220 registration fee (academics were required to pay only \$180).

The opening night's discussion was devoted to the question of whether or not job enrichment programs are a full employment phenomenon. As might have been expected, there were representatives of labor, business and academia on the panel. The businessman talked enthusiastically about his company's efforts, emphasizing the need for systemic, institutionalized change. Since his is a unionized shop, he not suprisingly remarked on the importance of involving the union in any successful effort.

The union official expressed his caution and supposedly the caution of unions in general with work enlargement plans. That caution is based on the fear that such efforts are not really concerned with the worker's environment, but with higher productivity. "Work improvement programs which are just a ploy for speed ups will not," he said, "get union support."

Professor William Gomberg, a labor organizer turned labor relations academic, cautioned the participants to be careful in their enthusiasm for all these new programs. "I think," he said, "that a dangerous supposition is being made by social scientists, that happy workers are productive workers. You know," Gomberg continued, "we haven't changed much in terms of ideas about improving the work place, we've just come up with new names for what we want to do, and yet social scientists yell eureka as if they had discovered something new. It amazes me that academics use language the way dress designers use style."

When these three men had finished with their statements and rebuttals, the floor was opened to the participants for questions and comments. This is often the moment for someone to start on the irrelevance of what has been discussed, or to put forth his own pet theory. There was some of that, but it was much more muted than at most conferences I've attended. The majority of the speakers were either government employees

or academics. The business people, who compromised more than 80% of the audience, talked very little. When one of them did, he tended to ask practical questions of Sidney Harmon, President of Harmon International Industries, and business member of the panel.

The session finished, the first business cards were exchanged. People retired into the next room for drinks, and to make arrangements for an evening on the town before settling into the next day's busy schedule. The second day of the conference called for three two-hour small workshop sessions.

From what I could tell, almost every participant encountered charts, diagrams, or slide shows. The story lines offered at each of the sessions I attended were amazingly similar. At some point the company representative giving the presentation would say that his company had discovered that people were stuck in boring, repetitive jobs, that production was down, and that quality was poor. The company would then through some not so clear process decide that something needed to be done, and a plan involving "the quality of work" would be instituted. Whatever the plan, the discussion almost always got around to redesigning the work, whether that meant self design, job enlargement, or work simplification. The discussant would usually mention the need for job enrichment, greater participation, and the need to share some of the monetary gains with the workers. There would follow a brief description of how the program was instituted, and then the listeners would be told of the amazing improvements in quality, productivity, and worker attitude which resulted.

In general I found that the discussions tended to stick very close to this model, and to procede on very general, non-specific issues. The one exception was a talk by Dr. Charles Hughes of Texas Instruments. His approach to the problems of worker dissatisfaction was markedly different.

The basis of Hughes' theory is that instead of fitting all workers to all jobs, jobs should wherever possible be suited to worker's value systems. Different jobs and different supervisory styles will satisfy different people's needs. "Look," Hughes concluded, "we ought to stop trying to change people, and learn to accommodate them."

Dr. Hughes and a colleague, Vincent Flowers, have evolved a personality questionnaire which they use to fit jobs and people. Each respondent is placed within a seven tier value category grid which runs from tribalistic to existential. Both Hughes and Flowers believe that knowlege of a worker's value system will permit companies to better match jobs and workers.

Dr. Hughes gave us an example of his approach in practice. He had been called into a troubled plant where production in a unit was low, and turnover was desperately high, running at 85% a year. The area was using a fifty million dollar piece of equipment. As Hughes said, "There ain't no way to change that, that's part of the problem isn't it? We decided that the work was indeed repetitive, and not very creative, but we decided not to alter the job content at all. Instead, we

did a lot of interviewing, and weeded out the type of people whose values showed that no matter how many boring jobs we added they wouldn't be satisfied. We could enlarge one job, but we really weren't going to change the nature of the job. We switched certain people out, and then we looked for people who fitted two categories in our value system, people who were either tribalistic or conformist. We found that by stocking these particular jobs with these people the turnover rate was reduced greatly and production went up."

Unfortunately, Hughes did not have time to enlarge on his practical experience with his approach, which lends itself, I fear, to a great deal of worker manipulation.

By the end of the day most people were thoroughly exhausted and ready for an evening of entertainment. The last session was less than fully attended as was the next morning's wrap up session.

The wrap up session offered three company representatives and two professors, one from Yale and one from Harvard, explaining the need to continue along the road of job enrichment. The most interesting aspect of the wrap up session was the negative reaction of the business representatives to any suggestion of joint effort in this area with government agencies. One man said that his company would not share its efforts with the government. John Schmid of Ralston-Purina said, "If it's an effort in which the government is involved, we are not interested." Schmid later explained the difficulties Ralston-Purina had had with other government efforts. "Look" he said, "we've been involved with the government on a job training program. We found that it was costing us more in paper work than the government required than what they were giving us to help operate the program. Finally we decided to take the program over and do it ourselves."

Soon the final session was over, and a final flurry of cards were exchanged. Some new participants who had not realized the heavy demands that would be made on their cards were caught short.

I felt that certain issues were not adequately discussed at the conference. First, I am bothered in situations like this that workers are rarely involved in the discussion. I can't remember an out-of-house discussion of any work program in which workers have talked about their experiences. Any discussion of job redesign ought to involve those whom such changes immediately affect.

Closely connected to this is the obvious lack of candor on the part of company officials in discussing their efforts. Obviously not every effort is a success, and even a success is the product of some failures. Not one company representative to my knowledge used his time to talk about real problems in his company's program or approach. One night one of the representatives I went drinking with said, "Sure we've got successes, but we have failures too. We show the successes, but if you want to see the failures, you come to the plant

sometime, I can point them out." Another businessman stated that he was not free to discuss the problems his company was encountering. If that is the case, then such conferences can do little more than be Public Relations showcases.

Just as the participating companies seemed to be unwilling to discuss their failures, few seemed willing to discuss the nature of their interest in improving the work environment. It is straining credibility to suggest that there is not some connection with a demand for increased productivity. Some officials did give passing mention to poor quality and low productivity as generators of their interest, but almost none mentioned the more specific problems of widespread alienation, of high absenteeism, high turnovers, drug abuse, and sabotage.

A representative from Traveler's Insurance Company told the following story during the conference: One day he was riding home from work on the bus. As soon as the time clock struck hundreds of Traveler's employees poured out of the corporate headquarters. It was a rainy day and most were carrying red Traveler's umbrellas. The man next to him looked at the crowd and asked how many people worked at Traveler's. Our man answered, "About 30%".

Companies are well aware that employees hold back, and restrict their production. To a large extent the workers feel trapped in a we-they rather than an us relationship. Within limits this attitude is probably acceptable. However, I think that the business community is increasingly alarmed by the attitude of younger workers.

Journalists and social scientists may have exaggerated the differences between young factory workers and their parents. Given an economic crunch, these young workers may become much more passive. However, society has changed greatly in the last thirty years, and it would be impossible for young factory workers not to reflect these changes. A society which pushes ever onward toward greater individualism, toward open classrooms, can not later fit the products of that system into highly authoritarian structures.

The world of work will undergo major changes to accommodate this generation, both in blue collar and in white collar jobs. The business community can either continue reacting ad hoc to new demands and needs or to attempt systemically to institutionalize change. Sidney Harman was correct that first night when he said, "No serious change will occur until the attitude of those promoting change is altered toward those who must be affected by that change."

*Richard J. Balger*