

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RJB-#31
Two Shifts

98 Charles River Road
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December 16, 1974

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535 Fifth Avenue
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Dear Mr. Nolte:

The majority of people in the shops work the first shift. However, there are second and third shifts on which several thousand people work. After working on the day shift for four months I got a chance to work on the second shift.

Ed Patrick, who had correctly predicted I'd be sent to work in one of the thin film rooms, said, "See, what did I tell you? After you've sweated down here they want to put you on a cozy job before you leave. (We had just been through a very tough summer, the last one in the shops without air conditioning. The temperature occasionally rose into the high nineties, making work very uncomfortable.) You won't have to worry about the heat anymore, you'll be in a climate-controlled environment."

When other people learned of my new assignment they wanted to know who my new supervisor was going to be. I didn't know. People told me to find out, because who your supervisor is is as important as what your job is going to be. Ann Smith told me, "There are some supervisors in here I wouldn't work for no matter what they offered me. You better hope you have someone as good as Jack."

I took a lot of kidding about the new job before I left the first shift. "It'll be like a country club upstairs," Debbie Harris said. "Hell," Larry Garney said, "you'll think you're on vacation up there."

"You'll see," Andrea Hoeffler told me, "they work differently on the second and third shifts when the big shots aren't around. It's much more relaxed. I think you'll like it."

Although I only worked upstairs on the second shift for a month I discovered that there were many differences between the shifts, the tasks, the groups, and the environments in which people worked.

Unlike the equipment shops which are open and in which workers are required to wear no other special clothing than safety glasses, the thin film rooms are enclosed and climatically controlled spaces. White smocks and white caps are mandatory wearing apparel. Where I worked most people were also required to wear "finger rubbers" to protect the work from grease.

One woman told me that working in the climatically controlled thin film rooms, wearing a white smock, made her feel as though she was working in some fancy place, such as a hospital. She said, "I know I work in a factory, but when I talk about a factory I'm really talking about the shops, and not the thin film rooms."

There were some immediately noticeable differences between the tasks performed in thin film and in the equipment shops. Most of the work in the equipment shops is done by hand--hand inserting parts, clipping leads, and soldering those leads. The work done in thin film rooms is primarily done by machines. Physical labor is minimal. Most of the work is tending machines, keeping boards moving through a variety of processes.

Most people I met at night seemed to like the predominantly non-physical work we did. Many who had worked in coil winding or at hand inserting were glad they had been surplused or transferred into thin film.

I found, to my surprise, that I didn't particularly like the work. I discovered I was much more bored at night than I had been in the equipment shops. The work was easier, as people had said it would be. However, I found that my job at night was primarily as an attendant to a machine. I had a lot of free time on my hands. There were often long spaces of time during which I was waiting for a machine to finish a process. I could, and did, move around, talk, and read, while waiting for the machine. All the non-busy time made the evening go very slowly. I realized I preferred being busy as I had been most of the time downstairs.

Although I didn't particularly like the work we did, I found that I much preferred working the second shift hours to those of the first shift. The second shift is not supposed to be the attractive shift. In fact, the company pays a ten percent bonus to those people working on it. New workers are usually assigned to the second or third shift. There are, however, some people who work the shift by choice, either because of child care needs or time preference.

Several people told me they liked working the second shift more especially in the winter because it meant they didn't have to get up at 4:30 to shovel their driveways, and get started coming to work in pitch dark. I also preferred the second shift's hours. I never got used to getting up at 5:15 in the morning. Even though the second shift didn't get out until 11:30 PM, cutting out most social life during the week, it saved me from getting up very early, which is something I deeply appreciated.

With all the differences between the jobs and the environments in which they were performed, I soon discovered that the major difference was the atmosphere. On the second shift there was much more of a feeling of freedom than on the first shift. For a while I thought this feeling might have nothing to do with different shifts, but with the different supervisory styles. The two men I worked for were quite different.

Harry Dresden, my second shift supervisor, is a college graduate holding an engineering degree. He is what many people consider the new breed of first line supervisor. He didn't work his way up in the shops into a supervisory position. Instead, he came over to the shops from the offices. He is a warm, open person, who is not reluctant to talk about himself, his family or life. Harry has a good reputation with the people who work for him. As one worker told me, "Harry doesn't care so much about those diddly shit rules: be here, do this, do that--as long as you do your work, and don't take advantage of him."

Jack Turner, my supervisor on days, has worked for the company for 23 years. He received no college education, and worked his way up through the shops. He is part of the old guard. Jack, unlike Harry, is very close-mouthed about his personal life. Jack has a reputation as a good supervisor who is particularly effective at starting up new jobs. He is known as a companyman, a person who lives and works by the book. He is strict, but fair. Without exception I was told by people who had worked in other shops that Jack was one of the best supervisors to work for.

These two men brought very different approaches to their jobs and I'm sure that if they were working right next to each other they would treat their groups differently.

I didn't spend time working for a bad supervisor, but I heard a good deal about them. A bad supervisor, I was told, keeps his people under constant pressure. I heard about supervisors who wouldn't let people out of their seats. A couple of women told me they had worked for supervisors who made them so nervous that they developed ulcers. A bad supervisor was, I also learned, one who didn't care about his people. No one defined what that meant.

By the time I stopped working on the second shift I realized that the greater freedom of the second shift was due less to the differences between individual supervisors than to the presence or lack of presence of higher ups in the shops.

Before 5:00PM the second shift and the first shift seemed very much alike. If you wanted to take a break, if you had nothing to do, you left the area and went to the bathroom to smoke, talk, or read.

After five o'clock, however, things changed dramatically. People actually read near their work; they walked around the area and spent more time talking with one another and they changed the way they operated the machines. This transformation was primarily due, I learned, to the fact that most of the managers, engineers, and "big cheeses" from Mahogany Row (the top floor management) had gone home at 4:45.

On the very first day I began working upstairs I saw someone, Donald Jones, reading a paper near his work. I was flabbergasted. I couldn't imagine anyone downstairs during the day sitting and reading by his work. If you wanted to read you left the area. I asked Donald about it and he said, "As long as you're discreet about it, and do it after the bosses leave, Harry won't hassle you. Just do your work and you can read when there's nothing to do."

I discovered in the next few weeks that many things changed after five o'clock. We didn't run the machines at the same rate in the first part of the evening as later on. One day Jerry Kelly told me, "After quarter to five when the engineers go home we do things up here the way we want."

That was exactly what happened. Before five the developing and laminating machine which I helped two people run was run exactly the way the engineers wanted it to be run. The machine required a feeder, who fed the boards into a conveyor belt. They then went through a series of sprays and were removed from the belt by a catcher at the other end. The engineers, who were frequently walking around before five, wanted the machine operated at a belt speed of between two and three, and that was how it was run until they left. Then the machine was often sped up. Although the speed was left at the lower numbers during the first few developing stages, when it came to the last spraying we often sped the machine to six or seven, for no other reason than that it was more challenging to try to catch the boards without them backing up at the higher speeds. Occasionally when things were going slowly and we were bored we had a contest to see just how fast we could run the machine without boards backing up.

Although on its surface this might sound reckless, the men working the machines seemed to know just how fast the boards could be run without their being spoiled for inspection. They also had their own ways of mixing chemicals, and measuring things. I was amazed at the little tricks, and the ways work could successfully be sped up when people wanted to work faster.

The change in atmosphere was noticeable in many other ways as well. After five if you were tending a machine and waiting for a process you didn't have to stand by the machine. You could move freely around the area and talk to other people.

This was in contrast to how things were before five and downstairs during days. Downstairs if you went to talk to someone you were made to feel conscious that you shouldn't stay very long. In my first shift section, you quickly learned that our supervisor disliked seeing you just standing around. So, if you weren't busy you stayed at your bench or left the area.

This greater freedom of movement and more relaxed environment on the second shift carried over into the way breaks, meals, and leaving time were handled. On the second shift we were never pressed to get back from a break exactly on time. Many people, in fact, often left just before the break was to begin and returned a minute or two after it had finished. As for dinner, most people clocked back in before the half hour was up, and sat outside for a last smoke or some conversation, often not going back into the thin film room until a few minutes after the bell had rung.

On the day shift, if you weren't back in your chair after a break, or when the bell had rung after lunch, our supervisor might be standing near your chair waiting with a frown on his face.

People generally quit much closer to quitting time on days than nights. I found that although people might slow down after 2:30 on days they rarely left their seats to get ready to leave until five minutes before the end of the day. People didn't seem to feel that compulsion upstairs.

There was, I realized, much more of a feeling of the time clock controlling things on the first shift than on the second shift. One couldn't ignore the time clock; however, it didn't seem as controlling on nights as days.

I told a friend of mind who worked on days how much freer things seemed upstairs at night. Ed Patrick wasn't surprised, nor were the other people I talked to on days. What they said verified my own feelings. Supervisors on days get a lot more pressure from higher ups than supervisors on nights. As Ed Patrick said, "On the first shift supervisors can't afford to have someone standing around doing nothing, because they never know who may be walking around watching."

First shift supervisors, knowing that higher-ups may be watching, are very concerned about how their area and people look. They tend to pass the unstated pressure they feel onto the people working for them. When the higher-ups leave, second and third shift supervisors receive less of this unstated pressure and therefore are more relaxed with their people.

Many of the people I met on the second shift had worked at some time on the first shift. To a person they preferred the lesser pressure of the second shift. Jim Grego told me, "Sure I like it better. After five we don't have to worry about the bosses walking in and out. There's just not all the pressure and hassle that you've got on the first shift."

I wondered if the greater degree of informality on the second shift meant that less work was accomplished. The people I worked with on the second shift didn't think they worked any less hard than people on days.

In fact, several claimed that even with--or because of--the looser atmosphere, they produced more than people on days. The fellows who ran the machine I worked on were always complaining about how much more they got done in an evening than the people working on days.

I asked them, and others, why they thought they got more done. People said they liked to know in advance how much work had to be done and then be given the freedom to choose how to do it. "Look," Irene Landers told me, "you pace yourself whether they're watching you or not. This way up here we know what we have to do, and we do it. That's how work should be."

The more I thought about the way the work was done, the more I realized that people on the second shift did seem to have a greater amount of freedom in deciding how to schedule their work.

While I worked on the first shift I felt, like most people I knew, that no matter how much I did there would always be more work around. In fact, if there wasn't work there would be "make work", so I kept myself looking busy. Most people I knew had internalized their own pacing system, aware of the fact that as long as they remained in their work area they were expected to work. This constraint was not nearly as strongly felt at night.

I was glad that I had an opportunity to work on the second shift, even for a very brief time. It gave me a chance to see a different group, work on different types of jobs, and meet new people.

Unless people at night produce less, there seems to be little reason why the looser, less pressured, more open atmosphere of the second shift should not be exported to the first shift. Control over output, which is the worker's covert prerogative even when it is not his overt privilege, is an important element of job satisfaction. By allowing the second shift worker to organize his work day rhythm, Western Electric allows him a valuable sense of daily accomplishment.



Received in New York December 20, 1974.