

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RB-4

The Search For A Job

846 Broadway-1st #49
Saugus, Mass. 01906
February 6, 1973

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

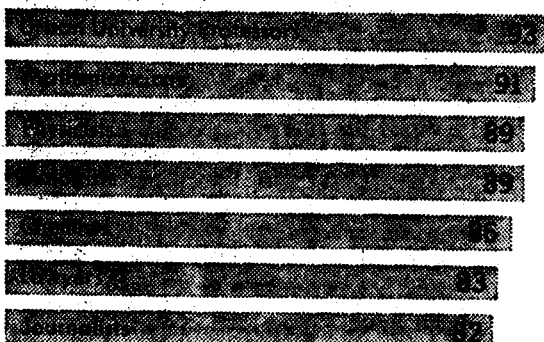
My plan for finding a job is fairly simple. I want to get a factory job for two or three months. During this time I hope to make sufficient contacts with workers so that I can devote a major part of the year getting to know ten or twelve workers fairly well. Much of my time will be spent outside the factory with these workers and their families. I also feel that the better I get to know the workers the more I will also want to photograph and watch them at work. So I need to have access to the factory after quitting work.

Of all the decisions I had to make concerning this plan, possibly the most basic were why should I go to work and for how long. It is obvious to me that I could learn something about factory workers' lives simply by interviewing a number of them. It is a fairly standard practice to select a certain group and ply them with extensive, well thought out, questionnaires. I have never liked this approach. I'm never quite sure what it means when you ask a person what he thinks of his work. I must admit that it isn't only the questions that bother me. Often the answers, which are coded and grouped into neat categories such as in the chart below, bother me. They do supply some information, but I have found such information to be only minimally useful.

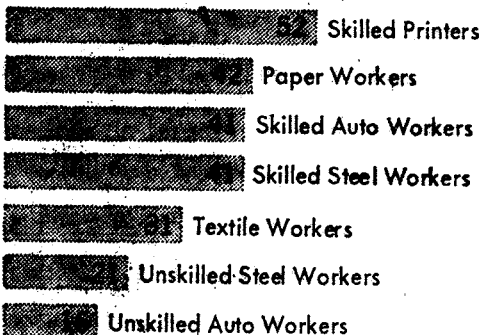
Job Satisfaction in the U.S.

Percentage in Occupational Groups Who
Would Choose Similar Work Again

White-Collar Occupations



Blue-Collar Occupations



White-Collar Workers, Cross Section



Blue-Collar Workers, Cross Section



Source: "Work In America" for H.E.W.

For me the way to learn from people is to live and work with them. You need some sense of their reality to intelligently gauge their answers.

The next obvious question is how much of that reality do you need to know. I find this a particularly difficult question. I haven't found an easy answer to it. I felt I wanted to set a minimum amount of time that I would need to work in order to get some feeling for the work situation. I felt that I would need to work at least two or three months. I may be wrong, and may later discover that I need to work longer, but for the time being I have settled on working for two to three months.

My next decision was as to the size of the factory. After thinking about it for a while and talking to some people I came away with two categories, each seeming to have certain advantages. The two categories were factories with more than 2,000 workers, and factories with between 250-500 workers.

I felt that the greatest advantage to a large factory is that it had the possibility of being representative of the type of work situation that a larger and larger number of people are involved in; that is, working in a rather big impersonal situation--one in which you know a small number of your fellow workers, and few, if any, management people. Also, in a large factory there tends to be a wide range of skill levels. Often when there is a wide skill range there is a rather extensive ethnic mix. The principal drawback of such a work situation is that in a short time one can get to know relatively little about the operation. A worker quickly becomes part of a small group, and usually knows few workers outside of his area.

If size is the major drawback of large corporations, it is one of the prime drawing points of a smaller operation. With between 250-500 workers one can get to know the entire work force reasonably well. Also, one can get a fairly good sense of the company's operation in a short time.

Given that I wanted to find out about the lives of factory people, what they are like, how they have or haven't changed and what they might be like in the future, I tended to think that I should steer toward a smaller operation. Nevertheless I contacted both large and small companies.

Once I had decided to do this project I had to decide the best way to get a job. I considered two approaches. One was to read the want ads and apply for a job. The other, the one I chose, was to contact companies, explain the project, and try to enlist their support.

I decided against simply applying for a job for several reasons. First, there isn't a great deal of downward mobility in this society. If I went into an employment office and filled out an employment application(which would include questions about previous employment) putting down that I was a lawyer and had worked as a lawyer, I think there would be a great deal of suspicion, and I probably wouldn't get a job. Of course I could make up a

person and a phony application. I don't like that method. Even if I get a job this way I think it is highly unlikely that a company would later allow me access to its plant, both for interviewing, and for photographing.

I also realized that if I applied and wasn't honest with the management I really couldn't be honest with my fellow workers. I would have to present myself as something other than I really am. So I abandoned the applying for a job approach.

Over the last couple of years I have had some experience with corporations so I was not walking into the situation totally unaware. I have learned, for example, (Balzer's first law of corporations) that the larger a business, the more difficult it is to visit their plants. My experience had been that a company which was owned by an individual or limited partnership was more accessible than a large corporation. Closely connected to Balzer's first law is Balzer's second law, which states that if you want to get anywhere with a corporation you need to know someone high up in the hierarchy.

I began trying to find out about Boston-area businesses. I had some help from supportive union people, individuals, and friends who knew people in different companies. I started contacting companies. Below are the results of a few of my efforts.

Gillette

With the help of a friend I was able to get an appointment with Joe Turley, president of Gillette's largest Boston manufacturing division. On January 22 at 5:00PM, I rode into the Gillette parking lot and as most of the office staff walked out I got security clearance and went up to Mr. Turley's eighth-floor office. Mr. Ford, who is in charge of personnel, and another man whose name I forget but who is in charge of plant operations, joined us.

The meeting began with my describing and talking about my project. I was asked a few questions about specific types of problems, how would I select workers, what would I tell the workers, what shift would I want to work on, what type of job could they give me except the most unskilled.

After this, they asked me if I knew anything about the Gillette operation. I admitted that I didn't. Mr. Ford explained that maybe I wouldn't be interested in the plant because, as he said, it wasn't typical. I asked what he meant and he explained. "Well," he said, "first of all we don't have a union. Second, we don't pay hourly wages. Our workers are paid on a weekly basis." He continued, "This makes a big difference. In other companies if there is a snowy day people kill themselves to get in so as not to lose eight hours pay. We don't operate that way. If you're out a day, you don't get your pay deducted. We do have our people punch a time clock, not to count hours but for production runs."

Mr. Ford was joined by Mr. Turley in talking about the plant. There are approximately 2,800 workers in the plant; 2,100 are production people. Both men talked about extensive benefits and noted that the company had more than 56 group activities covering a wide range of worker activities.

I was asked if this was the type of plant that would interest me. I said I thought it was but that I would like to look around and talk some more.

We talked for another half hour. Again and again the conversation turned back to problems with the project. If I was hearing people correctly they were saying that they liked the sound of the project but couldn't see how they could work out a lot of problems that it might cause. And, of course, there was talk about what good can such a project do for Gillette. Nothing was resolved.

After a while Joe Turley asked if I would like to see the plant. I said yes, and we took a tour. The second shift, which is considerably smaller than the first shift, but larger than the third, had already begun. We walked downstairs past a group of workers who were getting chess lessons. Mr. Turley mentioned again that this was but one of the many activities Gillette organized for workers.

The plant itself was very much like several factories I have visited in other parts of the country. A number of the jobs are fairly repetitive. People are primarily involved in sorting and packaging after the product, in this case safety razers, comes off of highly automated machines.

On our way back upstairs we passed the modern cafeteria and the large clinic. I was impressed by the number of people Mr. Turley seemed to know, even though the conversations he had with most of them were stiff and very brief.

He told me that the company's opposition to unions was not because of pay. "Hell," he said, "we pay higher salaries than we would have to under a union contract. But with a union our flexibility would be decreased. With job descriptions under a union contract we would be less able to move people around."

We went back upstairs, where I was given a new double edged razor. Joe asked me what I thought. I told him it would be an interesting place to work. We walked out together and he said that he would take the matter up with the corporate officers. He told me that the likelihood of their saying yes was slim. The chances were probably 90 to 10 against it, but he would try.

Late the following week I tried to call Mr. Turley and was told by his secretary that Mr. Ford had been trying to get in touch with me. I called Mr. Ford who was quick to tell me that he was sorry but he had bad news for me they couldn't give me permission to do my project. I asked him if there was anyone else I could talk to or a chance that the decision could be

changed. He said, "Dick, I personally like your idea, I think it's refreshing, but I don't think you'll have any luck. Maybe you would get some flowery language but the answer will still be the same. I'm sorry."

Colonial Meat Packing

I had been in the Colonial plant once before. John Mitchell, representative of Local 11 of the United Packinghouse Workers Union, had introduced me to the company's manager, Larry Fields, and I had been given permission to photograph in the plant for part of a day. At that time, almost two years ago, I had found the operation interesting, and found both the workers and the management most cooperative.

John Mitchell again accompanied me when I went over to Colonial, which is located in South Boston and employs about 250 workers. We found Larry Fields in his white sneek near the loading gate.

He was between meetings, so he didn't have much time. Nevertheless he listened as I outlined my project. He said that he liked the idea and thought it made a lot of sense. He told me I would have to work hard in this plant, but that I would be paid well and that it was a good place. He said, "Look, I'll talk to my bosses about it. I don't make the decisions, but I think they might go for it. Call me in a week."

We stayed around the plant for a while longer, talking to some of the workers, and I left feeling good about the contact. I called Larry about a week later and he told me that at the present the answer would have to be no. He said that the bosses had two objections. First, right now they are economically strapped. They had just laid off 45 workers and couldn't see hiring anyone. Second, the owners didn't seem really enthusiastic about opening the plant up to the outside world. Larry thought that maybe given a little time, a month or two when the economic situation was better, the owners might have a different response, and he suggested that I call him then.

GM

General Motors has a large assembly division in Framingham, about 40 minutes from where we live, and I felt I should try to make some inquiries about working at the plant. Through some UAW officials in Washington I was put in contact with Mr. James Crellin, a public relations official in the Detroit offices of GM. We corresponded and I outlined my project. I hadn't heard from Mr. Crellin for several weeks, and just when I thought of writing again I received the following letter.



GM Assembly Division

General Motors Corporation

Central Office
30007 Van Dyke Avenue
Warren, Michigan 48090

January 24, 1973

Mr. Richard J. Balzer
310 Wesley Avenue
Evanston, Illinois 60202

Dear Mr. Balzer:

Mr. James W. Crellin of General Motors Public Relations Staff provided me with a copy of your recent letter to him requesting permission to do a lengthy study on operations at the GM Assembly Division plant at Framingham, Mass.

Your request has received serious consideration, but we do not feel that such a study as you propose would be compatible with the time our personnel would have to assist you nor with the orderly performance of production operations at plants such as we operate.

We do appreciate your interest in our operations and respect the thoroughness of your intended study of factory life in America. We regret that we cannot be of assistance in this matter.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Andrew V. O'Keefe".

Andrew V. O'Keefe
Director of Public Relations

AVO:em

cc: Mr. J. W. Crellin

Ames Textile

Through Richard Morse I had gotten the names of a couple of people who might help me. One, Edward Stevens, operated a family-owned textile business in Lowell. Lowell was once one of the centers of America's textile business. In the last twenty years the textile business, especially in New England, has experienced serious economic problems. Ames Textile is one of the few companies that have survived. In fact, it has grown.

Ames Textile was bought in 1927 by Mr. Steven's grandfather, and the family has managed the business ever since. The plant, which is located in an old six-story building, has a work force of about 240 workers; most of them are on the day shift.

Mr. Stevens seemed very sympathetic to my idea and took me around the plant. He knew all the workers by name and talked about the plant as a community. He pointed out workers who had been employed by the company for more than 30 years. Mr. Stevens said the wages were low, running about \$2-\$2.50 an hour, but he said they were competitive. Even so the company had until recently been having trouble getting extra workers even though the area is experiencing relatively high unemployment. They licked this problem when they shifted to a four day-10 hour a day work week.

We walked through the plant and I found it to be fairly depressing. The dye fumes were everywhere, and the building was old, and the work highly routinized. I felt that Mr. Stevens had been very open with me, and that if I had negative feelings about the place, as I did, then I shouldn't work there. Also, Lowell is more than 40 minutes away, making for a very long daily trip.

GE

I have avoided calling General Electric, which employs 13,000 workers in Lynn (less than 10 minutes away from my home) for two reasons. I felt that it was just too huge, too big to get any sort of understanding of in any reasonable time. Second, I didn't know anyone who knew anyone in the company's hierarchy. But Richard Robinson gave me the name of the GE public relations man-Robert Thorn. I called him up, briefly explained my idea, and told him I would like to come over and talk to him about it. Mr. Thorn said that he thought it would just be wasting my time. He told me the project sounded very interesting, something that should be done, but as he said, "We wouldn't be interested." I tried again, saying that maybe we could sit down and talk about it. He said, "Dick, I want to save you some trouble. I think you would just be wasting your time."

There were, of course, a number of false starts: companies that didn't have factories, only offices in the area; factories that were too small; and people who couldn't be bothered. I was told by a man who runs an apron factory that he only employs women, and that for me to get involved I would have to speak Greek, Polish, or Italian. He then told me that in his experience

working people are just like other people, only their perspective isn't as wide. "Come to think of it," he said, "most college graduates after being out of school for more than ten years have very narrow perspectives."

I have gotten a few more names, gotten a list of companies from the local chamber of commerce, and will keep trying. I will stick with this approach for another couple of weeks and if something doesn't happen I may be forced to change my tactics.

Richard Boff

Received in New York on February 12, 1973