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Editor's Notebook: The Workplace Isn't What It Used to Be

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The Workplace Isn't What It Used to Be

In case you haven't noticed, the language we use to describe work in America has changed in the past few years. Terms such as downsizing, re-engineering, shareholder capitalism, total quality management, privatization, leveraged buyout and global markets are now part of the everyday lingo of Americans and are the stuff of causal party conversation. Joined with these new words, however, are a disturbing series of personal concerns as Americans face up to a new world filled with constant change, insecurity, stress and anxiety.

Whether we like it or not, the way this country worked since the end of World War II and the expectations we had about building careers for the future have been replaced by an uncertain fluidity as workers come and go from job to job and careers are viewed as multiple rather than singular. Americans have had to abandon the traditional view of lifetime employment and become independent contractors who must possess the skills and the savvy to roll with unemployment or restructuring and still stay standing at the end. When the largest employer in the United States is Manpower Inc., a temporary employment agency, it is abundantly clear that the workplace has changed.

But merely complaining about jobs going South, corporate insensitivity, forced retirements and outrageous salaries for business executives will do little other than vent steam. Like it or not the world has changed and the American worker must change as well. This doesn't mean, however, that both the private employer and government agencies can't lend a helping hand by offering generous severance packages, retraining scholarships, more secure pensions and health benefits that travel with the worker. Furthermore, it may be time to explore a shorter work week tied to new hiring so that more people work fewer hours. Workers can't expect employers to lose that competitive edge, but they can expect employers and the government to provide some baseline of security and new employment opportunities.

Outside of losing a loved one, there is nothing more devastating than losing a job. Those without a place to go in the morning quickly shed their identity and eventually their self confidence. After awhile anger sets in as door after door closes. This country is only now waking up to the ravages of the global economy as fifty year old middle managers stand in unemployment lines with fifty year old assembly line workers.

It is sad that we have done little to ease the employment crunch facing these footsoldiers of the global economy. Corporations have been so busy looking over their shoulder at the competition that they have neglected to take care of their own workers. Government has been so convinced about the benefits of free trade and deregulation that it has done little to establish a workers “safety net.” Unfortunately, it is too late to help the thousands who have become part of a throwaway economy. But now that worker insecurity has become a political issue, perhaps those who have given so much to their company only to be pink slipped in the process will have a system in place to ensure some measure of job and benefit security. It's the least the country can do for those who made America strong.

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Editor