

American worklife

The American Work Ethic and the Changing Work Force: An Historical Perspective. By Herbert Applebaum. Westport, CT, Quorum Books, 1998, 228 pp. \$59.95.

The American Work Ethic and the Changing Work Force provides a historical overview of American worklife and work attitudes. It begins during the colonial times and extends to the present. Herbert Applebaum, the author, classifies the American workforce in two ways—first by skill or trade, then by certain demographic characteristics. He expresses that the book's goal is to create a greater understanding of America's culture and characteristics through a historical discussion of the development of the work ethic.

Even though this easy-to-read chronology of American workers is an overview, it provides enough detail to allow readers to compare and contrast specific workers of different classes from different times. For example, this book shows how modern day semiprofessional white-collar workers (or, as the author calls them, gray-collar workers) suffer job cutbacks from automation and less challenging work from routinization, as did factory workers earlier in this century. Today, the cause is computers; then, the cause was assembly lines. Interestingly, the author highlights attitudes during periods of transition, so that readers can compare how workers of different classes from different times reacted to major workplace changes, such as the invention of railroads, assembly lines, banks, and computers.

The book is organized into three chapters: the Colonial period, the 19th century, and the 20th century. The author describes the Colonial times in the Northeastern United States as dominated by the Puritan work ethic. The New England colonists spurned luxury and instead lauded honest, hard work that contributed to the community. Men, women, and slaves were farmers, household pro-

ducers, or craftspeople. They created complete products with little division of labor. Due to the paucity in population, many women worked alongside their husbands, and according to the author, many artisan slaves worked independently and were allowed to hire people and collect their own profits. Businesses were self-sufficient and autonomous—most were family centered. Work was oriented toward task rather than time, and job definitions and classifications were broad or nonexistent. The master-journeyman-apprentice system thrived. Applebaum infers that even though work was sometimes difficult and involved long hours, it gave people a positive sense of place in the community and a sense of pride. This, he believes was true even for the artisan slaves in the North; however, in the South, a more farm-based than craft-based region, slaves often were cruelly exploited.

The 19th century was a century of rapid growth and transition. Population exploded; America stretched to the Pacific Ocean and inventions followed each other in rapid succession. Some inventions were the telegraph, telephone, railroad, electric light, typewriter, and electric motor. Self-sufficient family businesses transformed into larger commercial businesses that hired waged workers, calculated profits, and were dependent on banks, rails, and other businesses. Merchants used the "put-out" system where they supplied raw materials, paid workers piecemeal to work at home, and marketed and sold the products. This became popular and eventually spawned factories. The author states that, in the beginning, workers were unused to the imposed time-centered discipline, division of labor, and authoritarian rule. They stiffly resisted factories. Manual laborers, craftsmen, and other wage earners yearned for more autonomy, self-fulfillment, respect, and leisure. However, they were fighting a losing battle against the need to increase production to serve growing demand. Farmers used new machinery, wage workers, railroads, and canals to produce

and transport more for the swelling population. Slaves, officially freed in 1864, were doing anything to survive because an unfair and discriminatory society continued to limit their economic and political freedom.

Continuing the trends of the 19th century, the 20th century has been largely characterized by Henry Ford's invention of the assembly line and the proliferation of bureaucracies to manage huge factories. The author believes that factory workers, who forgot the Puritan past, gave up their struggle for respect, individuality, and autonomy by performing routinized and repetitive tasks in exchange for money, vacation, and other benefits. The author describes drastic changes that have taken place during the latter half of the century. Civil rights and the women's movement have opened up opportunities for a majority of American citizens. Office environments have spread because white-collar, government, and service work have experienced multiplicative growth, especially in the 1980s. Presently, computers and electronics are rapidly leading to sophisticated information storing, manipulation, and communication. Increasing global and domestic competition are leading to the dominance of larger companies due to economies of scale and downsizing to save on labor costs. According to the author, this is eroding the concept of company loyalty and trust. Continuing education and training are now seen as a necessity for not only job advancement, but also job retainment. The author states that Americans are working longer and few actually gain self-actualization from work. According to the author, this combination has created a new ethic that takes place after work, a leisure ethic.

Although this book tries to describe the values, attitudes, and ethics of American workers, it provides little hard evidence to substantiate its claims. Absent are diary excerpts, letters, newspaper clippings, or survey data. Instead, most of the discussion is based on an extensive collection of books, journals, and

essays, which are not footnoted in the text. Ironically, each section seems to be simplistic, and overall, too brief in comparison to the lengthy bibliography. However, the author does cite studies and statistics for describing employment trends in the 20th century. In addition, in the latter half of the book, the author expresses several personal views on what he sees as problems with the current American workforce. He believes that work should be intrinsically motivated through challenge, responsibility, and personal pride, and not extrinsically motivated through money, vacation time, or other benefits. He also believes

that society has the obligation to provide people meaningful work by creating it and then giving people the education and training to succeed. More empirical data, case studies, and the citation of sources would have strengthened his ideas.

Applebaum raises the question regarding whether the majority of Americans will have work that increases self-esteem and self-actualization. He hopes that the introduction of decentralized decisionmaking, teams, social programs, and a flexible, diverse, and more educated workforce will lead Americans in that direction. Towards the end of the

book, he expresses cynicism about the current situation, but is optimistic about the future. Instead of summarizing the historical changes in the American work ethic, Applebaum seems to lobby for more government programs in education and training. Overall, *The American Work Ethic and the Changing Work Force* accomplishes its purpose as a credible, insightful introduction to the history of American work ethic and work life.

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Errata

In the article, “Cooperative provisions in labor agreements: a new paradigm?” (*Monthly Labor Review*, January 1999), table 2 on page 33 contains erroneous data for Stage 1 and Stage 2 provisions. The correct data are shown below:

Provision	Number of contracts	Percent of all contracts	Percent of all employees
Stage 1: Statement of intent to cooperate only	150	14.4	9.6
Stage 2: Joint committee to review issues	163	15.7	16.0
Total at stages 1 and 2 only	160	15.4	13.1

Hence, on page 33, the first complete sentence in the second column should read (corrections in bold):

There are **150** agreements that have established only an intent to cooperate. . . .

Joint committees (stage 2). There are **163** contracts that establish a labor-management committee that meets on a regular basis. . . .

On page 34, the second complete sentence in column 1 should read (corrections in bold):

. . .As shown in table 2, this number represents **15.4** percent of the total agreements analyzed and **13.1** percent of the employees covered under the agreements. . . .