

# Practical Strategies Online!

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The email and Web newsletter  
on organization and management issues

From Michael H. Smith, Ph.D. & Associates

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Dept. of Work: Work In America: An Update

### Work In America: An Update

The book, Work in America, debuted in 1973, a seminal report issued by, of all people, a Federal government task force. Using the best academic studies at the time, it outlined the work difficulties of that era such as blue collar alienation and the struggle for a work identity for women. It became required reading in universities and corporations and started a dialog on how to create and manage a healthy workplace.

The two authors, James O'Toole and Edward Lawler, went on to distinguished academic careers and just recently issued The New American Workplace, comparing their original findings with the progress, or the lack thereof, that's been made in the last 33 years. Their findings contain important lessons for managing successfully in today's workplace.

#### **Job Satisfaction**

1973- Dull, repetitive and meaningless tasks with little challenge or autonomy were reported at all occupational levels.

2006- Americans report more satisfaction with their jobs. They also report that their jobs more often give them more satisfaction than anything else. The authors raise the question of whether work has improved or personal relations have declined.

#### **Self –Employment**

1973- The trend was for the individual entrepreneur to become obsolete and for large corporations and governments to dominate the employment market.

2006- This trend has reversed itself especially in the last six years. In the layoff from the recession of 2001-2003, many workers became independent business people. The trend seems to be that working alone--in homes, cars, hotel rooms, cafés, and Starbucks-- is replacing working with others in more traditional offices etc. The flip side of this is that it's increasing the social isolation of many workers.

### **Women At Work**

1973- The job of "secretary" was used as a benchmark since it represented 1/3 of the female workforce. The quality of life for this group was considered poor based on stereotypes of secretaries, and often women in general, as gofers, pencil pushers, husband hunters, etc.

2006- The great majority of women are no longer trapped in in low wage "women's jobs." Women now predominate in law schools and are significant in other professional areas. The wage gap has closed and the government doesn't even keep track of "secretaries."

### **Retirement**

1973- People will not want to retire at 65.

2006- The trend is the same and good news for businesses in the coming labor crunch. However, although people want to work to feel productive, they also are feeling the crunch of not having enough income to retire and keep their current lifestyle.

### **Worker Involvement**

1973- Most of the efforts were confined to the redesign of small work groups. Little effort was put into large system changes that involved a plant or corporation.

The major exception was the Gaines dog-food company in Topeka, Kansas (owned by General Foods) which enlisted workers to choose their own production methods, allocate their own tasks, set their own schedules and recruit new members. This innovation reduced the need for employees from 110 to 70 and increased productivity, minimized waste and eliminated shutdowns.

2006- The bad news is that General Foods did not apply the approach to its other facilities. Over time, it added layers of supervision at the plant so that, eventually, self-management ended and productivity was close to the company average.

Other companies were more far-sighted and today many U.S.

manufacturing plants and customer service organizations operate with self managing work teams, flat hierarchies and financial gain-sharing plans.

### **On Obstacles to Change**

1973- Redesign of work appeared to be feasible but the barrier was complexity since there didn't seem to be a single source of job dissatisfaction. Experimentation at each workplace was recommended to find the best fit.

2006- While complexity is an issue, executives and managers are usually the biggest obstacles to worker involvement, not the work itself. This stems from personal fears about the loss of power and control as well as the fear that employee involvement won't match the costs of employment practices of low-wage competitors overseas

These fears are unfounded. High-involvement, high-wage and high-profit companies can be found across the board such as Southwest, Harley Davidson, UPS, Costco. These companies have lower wage costs and higher morale than their competitors, both in the U.S. and overseas. They involve their employees in decisions, reward them fairly and creatively, and provide training and career opportunities. And the employees show their appreciation with higher productivity.

Thirty-plus years later, the evidence seems even more clear: worker involvement, along with good treatment, pays for itself.

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Have a joyous holiday season!

Michael H. Smith, Ph.D  
Michael H. Smith, Ph.D. and Associates  
Conflict Management and Productivity Specialists  
5801 Leona St., Ste. A  
Oakland, CA 94605  
510-530-7900  
Fax: 510-530-7922  
email:mhsmith@michaelhsmithphd.com

Visit our World Wide Web site at:  
[www.michaelhsmithphd.com](http://www.michaelhsmithphd.com)

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