

Four Perspectives on the Future of Work

Joseph F. Coates in *Employment Relations Today*

WORK LIFE, AFTER FAMILY LIFE, is the second most nearly universal characteristic of our lives. Yet little research attention and study is paid to it. Social pressures influence our choice or nonchoice of a career path. The people in our family, social, and neighborhood environments influence our vision of what work is about and what work is open to us. Opportunities and constraints shape our choices, often in unconscious or invisible ways. Although there is a steady increase in the amount of scientific research about work, it is still tiny, considering the importance of work to individuals and to society as a whole. Knowledge about work is too often ad hoc, narrow, circumscribed, and merely anecdotal. We have gotten along fairly well in that situation, but the future immediately ahead of us presents new serious problems in the choice of careers, the management of work, the organization of work, and the various social controls over work.

Why is so little known? Customary practices, social issues, and other limitations shape academic research. A primary source of the funds for research comes directly or indirectly from the business community, which consciously or unconsciously exerts pressure on the nature of those explorations. Many studies exist and are reported in numerous journals about management, but relatively few studies are done or reported anywhere about work from the workers' point of view. Government reports include data about work, but are weak on interpretation mostly because of ideological constraints, political timidity, or simple past practices.

Recognizing those asymmetries and gaps in knowledge, it is nevertheless worthwhile to look to the future.

This article considers four snapshots of informed opinion and judgment about the unfolding work situation.

NEW WORKPLACE HAZARDS

Every occupation has its hazards and risks. High costs are involved for individual victims, employers, and society as a whole, as the hazards and risks at work lead to injuries, lost time, and crippled or impaired lives. The highly prestigious Institute of Medicine (IOM), the sister organization to the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineering, has given us a look at these issues in *Safe Work in the 21st Century*.¹ Its emphasis is on education and training needs of occupational safety and health personnel over the next decades.

The Institute of Medicine's report is obviously useful to the medical education community. The report gives the expected kinds of figures on death and injuries—16,000 U.S. workers are injured on the job every day, over 6 million a year. Every day, 20 people die as a result of job-related injuries, over 7,000 a year. The IOM report cites the difficulty in estimating occupational illness, reporting 860,000 cases in 1992 and 60,000 related deaths annually. The economic costs of job-related injuries (\$145 billion) and illnesses (\$26 billion) are higher than those for AIDS and Alzheimer's disease, ranking up there with those for cancer and circulatory diseases.

The IOM report recognizes trends influencing the composition of the workforce—notably, increased numbers of women, minorities, immigrants, and disabled people. Also the workforce is aging. While the number of workers under age 18 is also increasing. These trends have both obvious and more subtle implications for the issue at hand—the IOM's responsibility to look at the adequacies of current training and the adjustments needed in the occupational safety and health (OSH) workforce. The IOM approach looks at

the four traditional professions within OSH—occupational safety, industrial hygiene, occupational medicine, and occupational health nursing—and adds new fields, such as ergonomics, employee-assistance professionals, and occupational health physiology. The report also identifies changes in the organization of work:

First, new hazards could potentially emerge, both through the introduction of new technologies and through the performance of work in a more dispersed or virtual organization.

Second, businesses are becoming smaller and “flatter” (i.e., fewer levels of management) and are redefining the content of work and the nature of the employment relationship. They are under pressure to compete for talent, innovate, provide exceptional quality, and bring products and services to market quickly at competitive prices.

The effects of these business developments on workers include demands for new skills and continuous learning, expanded job scopes, an accelerated work pace, and the need to deal with changing workplaces. Workers also face uncertainty in employment relationships, increased interaction with both customers and coworkers, and more involvement with information and communication technologies.

Further, societal developments like the increasing numbers of single parents, dual-career households, and aged dependents challenge workers to manage multiple and competing interests in their work and home lives.²

It ends with a curious conclusion, “These factors are a major source of time conflict and carry the *potential* for causing dysfunction and distress in America’s workforce and workplace” [emphasis added]. This is a weak statement in view of the limitless writing about stress in the general press. It seems to me to be a terribly misplaced conclusion, since research shows a big, if not the biggest, cause of lost time at work has to do with mental problems, everything from stress to frank psychoses.

In general, the report seems to be squeezing into old categories the changes it correctly identifies in the workforce and problems in the increasingly flexible white-collar information workforce. The report fails to break away from the traditional structure and concentrates on surface improvement. It avoids a deep analysis of what is really needed in terms of preparing OSH personnel to deal with changing problems and circumstances. The report is weak with regard to the psychological issues of health and safety connected with work. There is not even conjecture about their costs. Yet those costs are available from other studies. The IOM

report strongly emphasizes the increasing fluidity of the workforce and the shoving of increasing responsibility onto the worker. The report found that this is not a good trend for the worker, but the report is weak on innovative approaches and the specifics of what might be done and the cost and benefits to whom. On the trend toward round-the-clock operations, not just in manufacturing but in the service sector and in finance, the report is mute. Yet an increasing body of knowledge tells us that badly managed shift work leads to accidents and can be extremely disruptive for workers.

In summary, the report is a solid piece of work that touches all the right bases but lacks freshness of insight. The consequences of the relative shift in the nature of work and how it should affect the educational training of OSH workers is neglected. The report is chokingly dry because of the lack of data and illustrations one would hope to find on specific classes of injury, illness, diseases, and disorders connected to the workplace. It does not include information on government employers (federal, state, and local) and whether there are any special problems or opportunities there—for instance, whether government could adopt particularly effective measures to manage the health and safety of its workplace, becoming a test bed and then a model for business workplace reform.

The report neglects cultural differences, such as attitudes of machismo or unfamiliarity with machinery and devices; these differences can lead to substantial problems that are not necessarily noticeable to an untrained supervisor. The report also overlooks any question connected with the operation of U.S. business outside the United States, yet that is an increasingly important element in the world of work.

The report lacks lessons that might be adapted from the experience of other advanced nations, such as Sweden, Norway, Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom. It would also have been useful to have the report highlight some outstanding successful examples of business or corporate health programs that are or could become models for widespread adoption and staffing. Perhaps any shortfall results from providing a narrow, rather than expansive, answer to the question asked—what are the educational needs and changing roles of occupational safety and health professionals?

THE FUTURE OF ORGANIZED LABOR

A central feature of a truly demographic society, and very much the case in the United States, is that you are impotent unless you are organized. The impotence comes from the inability to grab the attention of public

officials, pressure them, and cope with the powerful forces already organized around points of view and objectives different from your own. Therefore, in understanding the future of work, we must consider the future of labor organizations and the changes they will and must undergo.

Labor unions are a too restricted category, because other forms of organization that are not unions may come about or become important. For example, the American Association of University Professors is not a union, but it is a mouthpiece and advocate for academics. Professional associations such as the American Chemical Society, the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers, and the American Society of Mechanical Engineers are old-line membership organizations. They have to be attentive to the concerns of their members, and they do a good job on the strictly technical needs of members by reporting and publishing research and sponsoring professional meetings. They are relatively weak but may become stronger under membership pressure to represent their professionals' needs and concerns as workers.

Let's look at two perspectives on the future of organized labor. The first is by Paul Clark, an associate professor of labor studies and industrial relations at Penn State University who wrote the book *Building More Effective Unions*.³ The second book is Arthur B. Shostak's *CyberUnion: Empowering Labor through Computer Technology*.⁴ Shostak is a professor of sociology at Drexel University and a futurist with a long-time career interest in work and the labor force.

A Strategic Approach to Meeting Member Needs

Why are labor unions a faltering, if not failing, social institution? They obviously offer the benefit of meeting a wide range of needs of the general and specialized workforce. Numerous reasons for their decline have been put forward. One that I find especially attractive has to do with the flaws within the institution itself. American labor in its heyday, from the latter part of the 19th century through the mid-20th century, dealt to a large extent with immigrant workers—relatively uneducated workers who migrated from a rural to an urban context and were often socially at sea.

Labor unions succeeded by having bold leaders and a hierarchical structure that spoke down to them. While acting on behalf of the workers, those who rose to leadership continued to operate in that hierarchical, top-down, command-and-control model.

But society has changed, creating a better-schooled workforce, whose education is further increased by

television, radio, film, and news from newspapers and magazines. Democracy has spread in U.S. society since World War II to an unprecedented degree, yet the old-line unions still operate on the hierarchical model. For example, I find it more difficult to get access to a head of a labor union than to a CEO of a Fortune 500 company.

Ironically, in the early days, the labor unions, having no organizational model as a precedent, adopted the model of the organizations that they were confronting, namely big business. The model has not been updated. Union leadership became a parody of life in the business world in the early to middle decades of the 20th century. Top labor leaders sit in a large office isolated from the day-to-day activities of the union. Isolation from the ordinary members reflects and reinforces a distrust of the knowledge and judgment of those members. In any hierarchical organization, isolation also creates fear of being ousted from office and distrust of the reliability and intentions of the levels below.

Let me illustrate these points from my own experience. Being a futurist, I am concerned with a wide range of organizations, forces, and trends. In setting up my futures business, I committed myself to giving away my services a day a week to what I thought to be worthwhile causes, or significant opportunities to make a difference where there was not already a commitment to the future. In that spirit, I approached one of the labor unions that is purported to be among the most liberal, open, and innovative. I could not talk to the top guy, but I spoke to someone approximately two levels down, explained that I thought futurizing unions could be useful, and that I was willing to make a one-day presentation to the leadership or any other group within the union that seemed appropriate. After some dickering and hemming and hawing and making it clear that it was all free, we seemed to home in on a time and a place. As that date came closer, I then was told that I first had to submit a full draft of everything that I would say. That curious kind of constraint illustrated the union leadership's fear of the unfamiliar and lack of confidence in the audience's ability to size up what they hear and make their own judgments. We came to a parting of the ways on that.

Another more interesting example of the problems of the hierarchical structure with its intrinsic distrust of subordinates was an invitation to talk to a different labor union to a meeting of the organizers, obviously one of the most important groups in any union. I'd gone through my talk and moved into Q&A. The Q's were extremely interesting, and the A's I was giving, I thought, were stimulating. Then two burly men ap-

proached me from the rear, flanking me on each side, and announced that my time was up.

Although two anecdotes can't be definitive, they do reinforce the idea that there has been something fundamentally wrong in the orientation of union leadership to its members and especially to the new generation of workers. Paul Clark's *Building More Effective Unions* is right in the spirit of that diagnosis. His credentials are impeccable. He is an associate professor of labor studies and industrial relations at Pennsylvania State University. He has worked with unions and has written books on the labor union.

Clark's objective is to introduce the labor union community to behavioral science knowledge relevant to the primary issues, to "build a stronger labor movement by increasing the level of members' commitment to and participation in their union."⁵ The book is well written, clear, and straightforward, and for this reader, it repeatedly evokes the feeling "Why was this book ever written?" The material is so obvious, simple, straightforward, and commonsensical that it is hard to believe that the lessons drawn from behavioral science research are not already second nature to union leadership. However, one has to recognize that Clark knows what he is talking about. He is bringing to the labor movement and its leadership knowledge that has apparently eluded them in practice, or that for some bizarre reasons they never knew, or because of customary policies and practices, they have lost the connection between that knowledge and their objectives. Anyone who has engaged in any kind of social intercourse with groups would know implicitly and practice explicitly Clark's findings.

That Clark can present the obvious so earnestly just highlights the giant steps that organized labor has to take to bring themselves into resonance with the changing mental, social, and intellectual makeup of the people that they do or would serve. For example, he points out that "Organizing is the life blood of the labor union." He identifies five points that are critical to organizations' acquiring and retaining members.⁶ The key points are as follows:

- Attitudes toward unions in general, and toward the specific union that is organizing the workers, play a critical role in the unionization decision.
- The employee's perception of the union's effectiveness may be the pivotal individual factor, or in the "fulcrum" of the unionization process.

- Union tactics and strategies play a very significant role in determining the outcome of organizing elections.
- Unions should consider why many employees choose not to vote in union elections.
- Voters in decertification elections are influenced by many of the same factors that influence an individual's vote in a certification election.

What could be more obvious? Contrary to the myth that organizers should rouse up the emotions of the worker, research shows that to vote for a union is by and large a rational and instrumental decision, not one primarily emotional. Research also shows that in many cases only a small fraction of the total workforce will participate in the elections to determine whether or not to form a union. Ironically the tendency is, as more workers participate, the likelihood of unionizing decreases. It is well known from research that workers are not necessarily antagonistic to the employer. Promoting that image can be self-defeating for unionization.

"Job dissatisfaction plays a role in stimulating an initial interest in unionization," Clark writes.⁷ Employers have two strategies to cope with employees' desire for unionization. "Considerable research confirms that when an employer creates a hostile environment through such overt actions as intimidation, harassment, surveillance, and discharge union support is often reduced," Clark writes.⁸ On the other hand, the desire to unionize is also mitigated when the employer begins to adopt some of the measures that the union has raised as an issue, for example, when the employer becomes more participatory. This creates a challenge for the union. Clark has suggestions for what to do. Work on the fact that family attitudes toward unions have an important influence on the attitude of the worker. Clark makes a key point that expectations toward union effectiveness are of primary importance in setting up the union shop. In the longer term, however, there has to be a shift in general attitudes toward building unions' image. Particularly important is the involvement of family members, peers, media, and schools. The lessons sound like those common to most public interest groups today.

Clark's chapter on union-member orientation and socialization highlights the limitations on the top-down approach. He concludes that first impressions are extremely important in shaping an individual's attitude toward any organization. In a union, positive formal or informal orientation and socialization is essential.

Orientation programs are effective if they influence the attitudes of new members. Information is important, particularly as a part of the socialization programs. He also points out the desirability of building commitment among groups too often ignored: part-time and temporary employees.

The book deals with activities such as political actions, grievance procedures, information communications strategies, image building, culture, and leadership. His advice on political action is particularly interesting, because often 25-40 percent of the membership disagrees with the political position of the top leadership of the union. Clark's recommendation is to turn to the workers to find out what their most important issues are. Of course, one has to establish in the members' minds that the candidate being supported by the union is likely to facilitate or deliver desired outcomes to the members.

Clark strongly urges unions to move into strategic planning. In the 1980s, only 25 percent of North American unions engaged in such planning. By 1993, it was up to 40 percent in the United States, and it is probably still rising. A more strategic approach is a needed to complement union's traditional reactivity with more proactivity.

For business, Clark's prescription is unclear in detail, but clear in implications: More sophisticated and longer-range commitments on the part of unions might make them more even-handed and balanced on the issues they deal with and less focused on short-term stick points and grievances. Strategic thinking on both sides could lead to more recognition of mutual interests and cooperation. On the business side might be the recognition that busting unions may have value in the short term, but for the long term, embracing unions could be an important part of the business world in the future. U.S. business is slowly recognizing that those groups outside its responsibilities are increasingly important to its future-public interest groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), state and local officials, and international bodies. What should be recognized as part of those ranks are the organizations now and in the future that represent the issues, needs, and concerns of their workers.

Clark does not write in any significant way about unions moving in new directions, toward new kinds of members, or toward the unionization of middle managers, whatever the legal obstacles may be currently. The unionization of professionals, scientists, and engineers may be a bright new day for unions, as those groups recognize that all too often top management does not see them as affiliated with top management in spite of

their wearing shirts, ties, and suit jackets, but rather sees them as workers. Perhaps strategic planning on both sides could end their hot and cold wars and assaults on each other. This is not 1880, but the beginning of the 21st century.

Using Technology Effectively

A radically different but complementary view of the future of unions is found in Arthur B. Shostak's *CyberUnion: Empowering Labor through Computer Technology*. Because Shostak is a long-time friend, I feel I must restrain my boundless enthusiasm for this outstanding, seminal, provocative, and simulating work. Shostak is primarily a professor of sociology at Drexel University. He is a well-known polymathic futurist with a 45-year commitment to learning about, studying, teaching, and training in the U.S. organized labor movement. Among other things, he is a professor at the National Labor Relations College at the AFL-CIO George Meany Center for Labor Studies, in Silver Spring, Maryland, and has held that position for over a quarter century. He is also the director of the Drexel Center for Employment Futures, a university-based think tank devoted to exploring the frontiers of tomorrow's world of work.

Before turning to the substance of his work, the innovations in presentation are themselves noteworthy and merit wider adoption. Most of the chapters end with the usual reading list, but that is complemented by the identification of cyber sources. At the end of the volume are separate pithy guides to print and cyber sources. Many of the chapters conclude with a supplementary reading, usually by a union member describing some activity directly relevant to the substance of the chapter. The chapters close with a section the author calls "Reality Check," which looks at the plausibility of what was discussed, particularly in his advocacy chapters. Shostak's style is literate and easy to understand; his enthusiasm shows itself in virtually every paragraph.

As a general principle, the introduction of any new technology is by substitution. The new technology does what is already done but does it better, cheaper, faster, more reliably, at higher quality, or better by some other microeconomic measure. We see this occurring, for example, in businesses, hospitals, schools, and labor unions. The first things information technologies do is take care of the back-office work, the accounts, billing, and record keeping. It is usually years to decades before computer-related information technologies begin to be used with regard to the substance of the enterprise. Hospitals, for example, for decades recorded and rendered your bills with the aid of comput-

ers. But only in the last five or six years have computers become a significant part of the delivery of hospital health care. Only in the past few years have schools begun to take the computer seriously as a teaching aid and are still not yet fully aware of its emerging centrality in teaching. Shostak reports similar early-stage computer use in labor unions—computers are having little influence on the larger issues.

The central chapters of the book deal with three levels in the use of computers in labor unions. The first he calls “Cyber Naught,” which amounts to paving over the cow path (i.e., nothing of any significance is done). The second level, “Cyber Drift,” has the introduction of computers partial and going nowhere. His third category is “Cyber Gain,” which involves a more systematic, broad-sweeping use of infotech. His killer comment is that “Cyber Gain organizations do not deal with the future as much as they streamline the past. Only a far more ambitious use of informatics in general, and computers in particular, will really do the job.”⁹

The F-I-S-T Program

The centerpiece of his advocacy and analysis is “CyberUnion,” recognizing that in CyberUnion technology, use will always revolve around putting members rather than officers first, and putting democracy (rights and responsibilities) center stage. Accordingly, he says that a CyberUnion will:

- Employ computer-based tools to regularly survey members, both actual and potential, to learn in depth their needs and wants, their dreams and nightmares.
- Employ computer-based tools to survey members to learn preferences and priorities regarding major questions confronting the organization. Every effort will be made to improve member participation in union policy making.
- Employ computer-based tools to keep members abreast of relevant developments and to learn of such from the rank and file. The union’s or local’s cyberspace home pages will be updated weekly, and e-mail of real merit will flow often between officers and the rank and file.
- Make officers and staffers accessible to members via e-mail, and promise personal responses within 72 hours of a message’s receipt.

- Update its infotech infrastructure regularly. It will take pride both in being at the cutting edge and in making a special effort to take the membership there with it.¹⁰

The core of the CyberUnion concept is the need to make a F-I-S-T full of new tools:

- **F** for futuristics, a perspective;
- **I** for innovations, a cutting-edge tool;
- **S** for services, ties that matter; and
- **T** for traditions, a vision, and a commitment.”¹¹

Shostak believes that union members are ready for this, but the leadership is lagging.

According to a 1999 AFL-CIO study, 57 percent of working unionists have a home computer, and “for many of them, Web surfing is a genuinely popular enterprise.”¹²

His chapter 7, on futuristics, makes the point that most union activities involve some implicit concern about the future. What is missing is the awareness that there is an enterprise he calls futuristics, what I prefer to call future studies, which has tools and techniques to formalize and regularize activities to make those looks to the future more productive. His own experience, reported in a reading attached to chapter 7, is particularly telling. He has been teaching, as noted above, at the Meany Center for years, most recently adding to his schedule a course specifically on the future. He defines the program and its teaching components. In order to make it click, he had to adopt techniques specific to the people who take the course.

Trends and Change Agents

It would be interesting to find a comparable piece of work on futurizing corporations in the United States. To the best of my knowledge, nothing like that has ever been done, although some of my own writing has touched on how to futurize a business. With regard to innovation, Shostak sees the CyberUnion as a learning culture, placing high value on creativity and schooling. The computer will be important in all of those activities, the Internet, wearable computers, intelligent agents, and numerous other tools so familiar to the business community will open up planning to unions.

His chapter on services deals with promoting ties, that is, linkages, and again he writes about many of the capabilities such as hightouch learning centers, the use of laptops, skill-upgrading centers, coordination assis-

tance, and reaching out as ways of fitting the traditional face-to-face environment of the union through the extensive, explicit use of modern technology.

The fourth letter of F-I-ST, which stands for tradition, is directed at promoting roots. There are proposed virtual labor museums, the cyberspace calendar, edutainment, the provision of referrals, and again schooling. What it all amounts to, as different from even the best of the Cyber Gain unions, is a total orientation to the future and the development of the other three elements of F-I-S-T.

Shostak is a great advocate and enthusiast for women's roles in unions. He sees in them the new proactivisms he advocates. Women will be particularly valuable in two regards: as strategic aids in the computerization of organized labor and as guides to the reduction of sexism in labor.

A chapter on change agents outside the United States highlights the need for better international growth, coordination, and planning among labor organizations. Many countries now have broad enough Internet bases to make that practical. The United States at the time of Shostak's writing in 1998 had 203 online citizens per thousand. In the top ten countries, the numbers ranged from 244 in Finland to 46 in Germany. Unions are recognizing that labor issues are global in the same way that business issues are global, hence labor's lessons are transferable and their strength will lie in recognition of joint interests and intense international cooperation. A brief bit of data to suggest the significance of the issue is that in 1994, the last year for which data was available, 593 union activists somewhere around the globe were killed for their pro-labor work. Nearly 2,000 were injured. Nearly 70,000 were fired.¹³ Shostak's strong feelings are expressed in a quote from the same page: "There is no adequate instrument to check the worst excesses of transnational corporations."

The progress that he writes about is not easy to achieve, but achievable. He sums it up nicely:

All the more reason to seek resolution soon of five significant challenges the use of computers poses for Organized labor, namely, finding the right ways to subsidize access, to relate to union democracy, to protect against technological tyranny, to establish high standards, and to promote vision-aiding possibilities in computer use. All five pose hold choices, though choosing is made a little easier when F-I-S-T realities are brought to mind. CyberUnions will be stronger and finer for working through these choices, for to paraphrase the poet E. E. Cummings [sic], always the wise answer who asks a wiser question yet.¹⁴

The substantive issues of the future are not discussed in detail by Shostak. The issues are primarily used to highlight the needs for his F-I-S-T program. It is worth noting some of those future issues. There is no discussion of the misuse of computerized information. There is no discussion of the use of computers and other information technologies as weapons in global management-labor disputes. In the heydays of the industrial unions, it was common to put guards around manufacturing plants to prevent intrusion and protect property. That hardly fits a world of white-collar workers, where information technology dominates. The tools of information technology may become part of any new labor-management conflict. If a more positive relationship between management and labor does not evolve quickly, then wiping out information, cancellation of accounts receivable, the creation of false messages, and the broad area of hacking will inevitably become new tools of conflict.

The most significant issue over the next 25 or more years is the consequences of increased productivity from automation both in factories and in other blue-collar and white-collar jobs, leading to a situation in which 70 percent or less of the available workforce can accomplish all the work that is needed to meet national and global markets. The big issue then will be, what should be the policies of management and labor with regard to the total workforce? The worst and most destructive way to approach that problem would be a "tough-luck" response on the part of management. A sound strategic plan is needed, developed jointly by organized management and organized labor. We already have precursors of the problem in Europe where unemployment plus underemployment have over the last decade or more frequently run to 15 percent or 16 percent. While information technology may be the source of the problems, it may also be the path for joint discussion and effective public policy conclusions and recommendations.

THE IMPACT OF THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

A quite different view of the future of work is Robert Reich's book, *Future of Success*.¹⁵ Reich's credentials are outstanding. He is a university professor at Brandeis. He had been secretary of labor under President Clinton. He has written eight books and is a frequent columnist in the *New Yorker*, *Atlantic*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. He is a savant and a stylist.

Having been secretary of labor, one could expect that he would have comprehensive, deep feelings for the labor force as a whole, and having retired from government, would be able to offer a pot full of attrac-

tive fresh and engaging proposals for public policy to remedy any of the failures or shortfalls in work in the United States. Quite the contrary. Reich has a great deal to say, but his concentration is around a single topic: namely, the consequences of information technology and rising aspirations—aggravating and accelerating what he takes to be a natural and apparently universal tendency to constantly look for “the better deal.” In his diagnosis, most of the often discussed difficulties in society associated with business and industry come out of the pressures of the consumer for the ever-new. That in turn puts competitive pressures on corporations and in turn pushes them to severe measures driving for higher productivity by fewer and fewer workers.

Throughout the book, the chant is that the source of all of these problems is “*You*,” that is, the ordinary citizen, and that these trends are unstoppable. The industrial and business process continues to make people more and more uncertain about their future and less and less clear as to where, how, and when they will be paid or how stable their income is. Therefore it puts them in the position of diminished to zero loyalty to any employer and in readiness to jump at the earliest promising opportunity.

One of the most important side effects of this systemic uncertainty and anxiety is that U.S. workers work harder than they ever did, or at least harder than they did three decades ago. He equates more time at work with harder work. Americans work harder than equivalent people in other advanced nations for example, 350 more hours per year than the Japanese do. His argument continues that if you are doing well you have to continue your hustle, and you see yourself in fact or in your mind either on the fast track or not. You are under constant pressure to maintain contact with your customers, clients, and all of those who have given you the position that you have. You no longer are in a paternal large organization where you can move up the ranks by seniority and increasing competence. You must constantly promote yourself.

Operating across all the elements of society, schools, housing, community location, and even colleges and universities are powerful sorting processes in which the best and the brightest are continually pushing for more association with people like themselves, thereby further promoting a wider rift in society between those who are making it and those who are not. How does one deal with the question of getting out from under these terrible pressures and achieving a better balance in one’s life? A chapter on personal choice is almost laughable, in that Reich apparently doesn’t believe that any of the things that he discusses

will generally work. But if you get a kick out of them, give them a try. He writes, for example, about evaluating what is truly important to oneself and then acting on that. He discusses managing your time better and he even takes a nod (and then a swipe) at voluntary simplicity, which he characterizes as not so simple.

Having dismissed those personal approaches, he then moves to his recommendations for public choice. They are relatively tired concepts that have been kicked around for decades. The chapter, as far as I judge, is almost free of fresh, innovative, creative, and plausible ideas that get to the core of the matter. Having made the point throughout the book that we are responsible, he notes that “the emergence of the global high-tech economy seems largely out of anyone’s hands,”¹⁶ but he goes on to suggest some of the choices that have to be made. What are missing are any statements beyond goals. He suggests nothing about how those goals might become important enough to be introduced into legislatures, or forced into business practices.

Regrettably, Reich’s book is not written about or to all U.S. workers. It is written about and to the top two quintiles, the top 40 percent of families by income, taking only brief views of the conditions of the lower quintiles. The terrible shape, in terms of income, of the lowest quintile and continual drop of the second-lowest quintile’s income is noted. The middle quintile at best is stagnant. Most of the problems that he discusses are in the framework of the fourth and fifth quintile—the very well off to the obscenely prosperous. The lessons that he offers and the personal actions that he recommends are not available to the bottom two quintiles. It is almost as if the author were not aware that half of the population is to the left side of the IQ curve, aside from any disabilities that they may have connected with poor education, limited choices, and timidity about risk taking coming out of life-long experience.

Most people I know who have any feelings about Microsoft as a company through the use of their products are somewhere between moderately and severely critical of their products and their policy of changing products as a way to draw you in to buying each new wave of their modified programs. Microsoft is making better use of what was so successful in the car industry—the annual style change. The firm is inattentive to the actual use and user of their programs. In Reich’s model, that is our responsibility to do something about. There is nothing that I can conceive of that citizens like me can do to change the practices and behavior of Microsoft. Reich’s wagging of the accusative finger at us is so far off the mark as to be an insult to the reader.

Returning to his chapter on public choices, he has several suggestions in the form of goals. First, in order to cushion people against sudden economic shock, we should guarantee a minimal decent income. Employee benefits should be made fully portable and there should be community insurance. He says we need a transaction tax at a low level, perhaps at 0.1 percent. Trade laws should be amended to provide greater relief from sudden surges in imports. The second goal is to widen the circle of prosperity. He pushes the usual stuff, promoting human capital through education. He has one innovative notion—that at age 18 each of us should receive a financial “nest egg” of, say, \$60,000 to use as we see fit. His third goal, giving caring attention to those in need, includes taking kindergarten more seriously and requiring businesses to be more flexible about work hours. His fourth goal is to reverse the sorting mechanism in society. He proposes local property taxes and a national educational trust fund, school vouchers proportional to family needs, and housing-assistance vouchers enabling poor families to afford to live in higher-income communities.

The recommendations may have some value, but they are all tired blood, symptomatic of intellectual anemia. There is nothing systemic here by way of policy analysis resulting in a range of choices that could be put before the public. He presents no time horizons of 5, 25, or 50 years for his proposals.

I’m amazed at how the author can say so much and say it so well, and yet be so wrongheaded in his conclusions and recommendations. I could be entirely wrong. Being a frequent public speaker, I have learned that, in speaking, one of the most dangerous rhetorical devices that one can use—because it is most likely to misfire—is irony. It would be nice to think that Robert Reich has put together a work running 289 pages intended to be totally ironic.

The book is a rich mine of information and research reports over a broad range of topics and is well worth reading for that information alone.

Incidentally we who are responsible for all the problems of society that he mentions do as we do for one reason, to enjoy the benefits of new technologies and the associated positive effects.

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS

From the four books discussed, the future pattern of work and its issues is mixed and unclear. What is emerging are substantial deviations from past beliefs, concepts, relationships, and issues. For example, *Safe Work in the 21st Century* suggests the following to me:

- The costs and the sources of lost time relating to health and safety should be identified to indicate where further professionals’ assistance will be needed. This may be beyond the scope of individual companies. It could well be undertaken by business associations or by human resources organizations.
- With regard to the changing workforce pattern, what the specific issues are that immigrants, women, and minorities bring to the workplace with regard to health and safety should be explored and inventoried globally.
- The psychological consequences of stress as a source of reduced efficiency, poor attitude, frank illness, and lost time merit a closer look by business.

Clark’s work suggests that as unions become more sophisticated in building their membership, cooperation to alter customary hostilities between business and unions should grow and even flourish. Short-term success in union busting or decertification or interference with certification are the worst forms of business-worker behavior, in my opinion.

Lessons from NGOs, public interest groups, government, community activist groups, and others suggest that unions fall into the same category in which openness and cooperation have a high payoff. In any case Clark’s work clearly suggests that unions will be increasingly, not less, sophisticated than such organizations in identifying issues and needs and in promoting them.

From Shostak’s work, it is clear that there are big gaps in unions’ orientation toward the future. As strategic planning grows and becomes more long range, visions of both business and labor may find high value in joint planning and more cooperative attitudes in managing their futures.

Organized labor around the world will see a pressing need for cooperation in order to achieve some parity in confronting multinationals and local businesses, which in many parts of the world are more outrageously exploitative of labor than in Europe and America in the 19th century. The opportunities are to encourage, not resist, doing what is right.

Reich’s book has many implicit implications for business opportunities. Maybe loyalty is not entirely lost. Employers ought to learn to promote loyalty by responding to the stick points and the changing anxieties that business practices create:

- An employer should look at the extent to which 45-to-55-hour work weeks are really productive, and whether internal changes in meetings and paperwork could allow people to concentrate more on their tasks.
- Members of top management should be coached to alter their own tendencies to micromanage, which creates waves of excessive work among subordinates.
- Perhaps the best counsel for top management is to cut meetings by three-quarters and spend more time in strategic thinking and trend analysis.
- Discourage work beyond 40 hours by giving more forced attention to efficient work time and work life.
- Look more for personal rewards and avoid the rewards that promote destructive work patterns.
- Enforce vacation and holiday time.
- Set policies on the use of the Internet and other interpersonal communications outside of standard work hours.
- Stabilize the situation for the premiere employees so that they will be eager to stay and they will develop more loyalty to the organization.

The most important implication for business from all four books is twofold. First, pay more attention to what is going on, and second, pay more attention to the emerging and longer-term future.

NOTES

1. Institute of Medicine. (2001). *Safe work in the 21st century*. Washington, DC: Author.
2. *Id.*, 7.
3. Clark, P. (2000). *Building more effective unions*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
4. Shostak, A.G. (1999). *CyberUnion: Empowering labor through computer technology*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
5. Clark, 1.
6. *Id.*, 32.
7. *Id.*, 39.
8. *Id.*
9. Shostak, 95.
10. *Id.*, 113.
11. *Id.*, 114.
12. *Id.*
13. *Id.*, 209.
14. *Id.*, 220.
15. Reich, R. (2001). *Future of success*. New York: Alfred Knopf.
16. *Id.*, 234.