

Work in modern america essay



Work in Modern America The modern day American society hosts a broad spectrum of industries with various occupations and professions to engage today's workforce. America, much like most first world countries is a service economy based on the exchange of knowledge and expertise rather than materials and products. People have a long history of work and work evolution that has ultimately brought America to a service economy producing both strengths and weaknesses within the society and its economy.

As America has moved to a service economy, much of the manufacturing and production jobs have moved overseas to third world countries creating a reliance on other economies. This globalization of the workforce as well as unionization, and the increasing power of large corporations have greatly changed the face of the American workforce and the quality of employment and the definition of work in America.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze these positive and negative impacts that the service economy has had on America and connect the progression of this economy to the current issues concerning unions, globalization, the influence of corporate America over the rest of the society, and how these interconnected issues have affected people's relationships with work and family. The human work environment has changed more dramatically and rapidly in the last century than in any other time in history. Humans for the majority of recorded history have been nomadic hunters and gatherers.

It was not until around 9000 B. C. that Agricultural societies began to develop (Hodson, R. & Sullivan T. A. 2008). As these cultures developed,

they gave way to the great ancient civilizations of the Inca's, Egyptians, and other Imperial societies that " gave rise to large cities... [and] several thousand people lived off the surplus of the surrounding area" (Hodson, R. & Sullivan T. A. , 2008, p. 14). Craft trades were developed during this time, but the emergence of guilds and artisans under the feudal system.

Guilds during this time, provided much protection for their members by regulating vital aspects of their trades including fixed pricing policies, membership, and working hours and condition regulations (Guilds in the Middle Ages n. d.). These guilds were indeed the foundation for modern day unions. The progression from Feudalism to Merchant capitalism transformed the lives of artisans dramatically. The merchant capitalists' goal was to pay a little as possible for materials and labor. While the merchant capitalist society was short lived, it was an essential step in the progression of work leading civilization into the Industrial Revolution.

The full transition from agriculture to industry was not easy. England was at the forefront of the revolution; forcing " peasants from the land and their replacement by grazing sheep," (Hodson, R. & Sullivan T. A. , 2008, p. 20) in order to cater to the expanding wool trade. This migration of workers from the farmlands into the cities produced an oversaturation of the cities. The displaced workers were then forced to work in factories. The development of factories and the division of labor finalized the move from the use of skilled craftsmen to a fully centralized and capitalistic society.

Inside the factories, workers were often met with abuse, subhuman working conditions and long labor intensive hours in subhuman conditions. The

workforce's retaliation to these conditions resulted in the first unions; marking their first victories with child labor laws and limited working hours in the 1820 (Hodson, R. & Sullivan, T. A. , 2008). The union concept and their efforts expanded across the Atlantic to the American industrial society by the later part of the century creating unions as the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor promoting a better standard of working conditions across the workforce in the U.

S. The beginning of the twentieth century saw exponential increase in the development of technology in communication and transportation. These changes allowed for massive expansion of companies and their ability to control suppliers, competitors and consumers across the nation. These large companies swept the nation buying out and replacing smaller, regional companies; eventually creating a monopoly. This amassed to a hand full of wealthy and influential people holding the majority of economic and political power.

As these companies have gained in size, so have their political influence and development of bureaucracy and “ depersonalization of the work environment” (Hodson, R. & Sullivan, T. A. , 2008, p. 26). One of the most influential concepts and innovations to come out of the early twentieth century to change the face of production was the assembly line developed by Henry Ford and the Ford Motor Company and first used in production in 1913 (National Academy of Engineering, 2010) . With assembly-line production, job skills become highly specific to the technology and procedures used in a given plant.

Such jobs are considered semi-skilled because they require a specific skill but one that can be learned in a relatively short time... The organizations of production around an assembly line...and other forms of advanced mechanization are organized under scientific management [where]...the worker was to execute diligently a set of motions engineered to ensure the most efficient performance of a given task. (Hodson, R. & Sullivan, T. A. , 2008, p. 27) Assembly line production quickly caught on to other manufacturing industries and productivity in all areas rose dramatically as less of the labor force was need.

This evolution brought the American workforce into the late twentieth century and the postindustrial society. A new type of employment opportunity surfaced based on the provision of knowledge and expertise rather than mechanical or production skill. This new service based economy holds a great variety of jobs ranging from low-skilled jobs to highly skilled professional careers. No other time in history, has there been such a diverse class structure with so many of its workers belonging to a single industry.

Many workers in the service industry provide professional services becoming lawyers, accountants, doctors, programmers, engineers and scientists. These positions require a great deal of training or education on the part of the service worker and are generally compensated accordingly. These workers are also granted a high level of autonomy in their daily activities providing a much more satisfactory working environment and most likely find themselves in the upper-middle class. The other side of the service economy, however, includes many of the lowest paid workers in the country often struggling in the face of poverty.

These workers perform duties in food service, housekeeping, health care, retail and other positions which often provide Federal minimum wage as standard pay and are allowed little to no autonomy in their daily operations. The Federal minimum wage in 2010 is \$ 7. 25 with over 35 million Americans receiving this level of compensation according to the Department of Labor ([www. dol. gov](http://www.dol.gov)). This equates to \$15, 080 in wages prior to taxes for a full time employee working a full 40 hours each week. The U. S.

Census Bureau placed the poverty threshold for a four person family unit in 2008 at \$ 21, 834 and \$11, 201 for an individual under age 65 ([www. irp. wisc. edu](http://www.irp.wisc.edu)). Clearly, these wages are not sufficient to adequately provide for a family on a solitary wage and barely cover the survival of an individual. Barbara Ehrenreich in her book *Nickel and Dimed: On (not) getting by in America*, explored the American low-wage service industry to determine “ whether a single mother leaving welfare could survive without government assistance” (Ehrenreich, 2001 p.). She takes a job as a waitress, house cleaner and Wal-Mart employee to “ see whether [she] could match income to expenses, as the truly poor attempt to do every day” (Ehrenreich, 2010 p. 6). In many cases, she was forced to take on a second job, much like many people in the low wage industry are forced to do in order to make ends meet. For those attempting to raise a family on low wage income, taking a second job can add provide extra income, but comes with other costs.

Childcare costs have increased dramatically and the cost of obtaining full time childcare could be as much as the actual wage earned. Regardless of which end of the income spectrum, the expectations in the workplace are ever expanding, demanding more productivity and longer hours. This has put

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a great strain on many to find a balance between work and family life.

Particularly for women, who are still expected to perform most of the household duties, child rearing and work full time, there is immense pressure to fulfill each role to their maximum.

In a country that does not have any public or government assistance for care giving, most families have to rely on private solution such as split-shift parenting or relying on other family members to provide care while they are at work. Many companies today, however, have come to acknowledge the value of the family life and have begun to offer flexible working hours to accommodate for child care needs and “ one-third of all parents in the United States and one-half of single parents work non-standard hours” (Fitzgerald, K. J. , Gornick, J. G. and Meyers, M. K. , 2007).

Laws such as the family Medical Leave Act of 1993 have also granted parents leave time from work for child ailments or maternity leave. Paternity leave is also available under the act, however, men in the workforce are frequently chastised for taking leave from work to tend to family matters and the “ majority of managers believe that parental leaves are inappropriate for men” (Fitzgerald, K. J. , Gornick, J. G. and Meyers, M. K. , 2007). This places men in a severe disadvantage in finding time to participate in family and home care. With 80 percent of Americans working in the service industry (Hodson, R. amp; Sullivan, T. A. , 2008), much of the manufacturing jobs have been outsourced to third world countries where American corporations have determined that the cost of production is significantly less. Modern technology has allowed for communication and transportation of goods to cross continental boundaries and has made the world a much more

integrated economy. The globalization of the workforce has allowed for products to be manufactured at a lower cost which enables consumers to purchase these products at a lower price while the company still incurs a profit.

Multinational Corporations (MNCs) have had a major role in impacting the global economy, mostly due to their presence in underdeveloped nations such as the Philippines, India, China and Pakistan where workers are paid a little as \$. 26 per hour in U. S. Dollars as of 2003. Large corporations such as Wal-Mart thrive and exploit the less regimented labor laws of these nations to drive down costs of production, including wages. According to Greenwald's motion picture *The high cost of low prices*, a toy manufactured in a factory in China incurs a cost of \$. 8. It is then shipped to America where it is sold for \$14. 96; a \$14. 78 profit. According to the film as well, working conditions for these workers have proven to be substandard as well. The workers in the Bangladesh factory are reported as working twelve to fourteen hour days and yet brush their teeth with ashes from the fireplace because they cannot afford to purchase these essential materials (part 8 of 11). As a leader in world retail sales, Wal-Mart in fact sets the standards for other companies to follow.

While this gives them the opportunity to truly influence the world economy in a positive way by providing livable wages and employment opportunities to people in impoverished states, they choose to put the well being of the corporation ahead of the well being of the people who work for them. Wal-Mart is not the only company; however, that practices the exploitation of the underdeveloped nations and their people. And in fact, it is not the fault of the <https://assignbuster.com/work-in-modern-america-essay/>

CEO or any of the executives that the decision to act in this manner was determined.

As described in *The Corporation*, a documentary directed by Achbar, M. , Abbot, J. , & Bakan, J, the corporation is “ required by law to place the financial interest of their owners above competing interests. In fact, the corporation is legally bound to put its bottom line ahead of everything else; even the public good” (A Legal “ Person” 3/23). Therefore, the stakeholders of a corporation and their financial interests in the corporation are more responsible for the way a company is operated and the decisions made by the executives than the actual executives themselves.

This does not make the working conditions that these workers are subject to acceptable and neither is the corporations’ allowance of these actions to take place. Unfortunately for the workers in these factories, they do not have the freedom or the democracy to be able to voice their frustrations. Many endure these conditions because while the pay is minimal and working conditions dismal, it is often the only income for their families. Thus many who are allowed the privilege of a democratic voice have stood up for the rights of these people against the major corporations of the world.

In September of 2000, a massive protest arose in Melbourne, Australia against the World Economic Forum where major corporate leaders come together. They protested for worker’s rights and fair trade in all economies. Among the speakers at this protest were unionists from Australia as well as a laborer from Indonesia who earned \$1. 50 a day. While Indonesian workers had tried many times to unionize in order to gain better working conditions,

they pointed to the corporations present at the forum as being responsible for the attacks on trade union activists in both Indonesian and Australian soil.

She called for an “ International solidarity to end repression and exploitation” (Rowley, R. , & Friedberg, J. 2005). Indeed, while corporate power has expanded globally, so has the ability for workers across the globe to unite. From the early guilds to the unions of the Industrial revolution, the Union organization has reached global status through organizations such as UNI who “ focus on Global Agreements to achieve power and parity for workers at multinational corporations” (UNI Global Union). America has had a rapid and lucrative development in the workplace considering the short history of the nation.

During this time however, it has risen as an economically dominant nation. As the nation moved from an agricultural to industrial to a service economy, the development to large and multinational corporations have emerges to affect the lives of workers on a global scale. The price that many pay for working in today’s society is a lack of balance between work life and family life which gradually separated as people moved away from the land. Today, it is each of our responsibilities to be aware of the global working conditions and the interconnectedness of the world in today’s economy.

In my field of employment today is affected directly by the service economy since I work in the service field. The company I work for is an outsourcing company so may of the issues covered in globalization was very intriguing. My company just opened new sites in the Philippines and Costa Rica in order to compete on the international scale with other outsourcers. We felt the

impact of these new sites almost immediately as one line of business from our site relocated their services to the new site in Costa Rica.

Now is a particularly stressful time for the line of business I support since our contract has expired and they are in the midst of renegotiating the contract. There is always, however, the possibility that the contract will not be renewed and I will lose my job. As stated in the textbook and above, the service economy consists of 80 percent of the American workforce today so it is more difficult to find someone that is not affected by the service economy. Many of my friends work in retail or food services which both rely on a vibrant economy for profits.

My mother works in the administrative buildings of the school district in her city in California and she is always talking about people getting laid off due to budget cuts. The current recession has had a major impact on all economies but especially in the service industry. My perspective on work has not changes as a consequence of this class; however, I believe that I have been able to connect many aspects of work that I had not correlated before such as global union organization. As an Applied Social Science major, I was particularly interested in the work and family balance, particularly concerning women in the workplace.

As a full time employee and student, I often find myself struggling to find time for everything in any given day. The fact that many of my class mates also include the role of parenting it is difficult to imagine how much work it takes to juggle all these components of life. This class has been engaging and though provoking as a view into the social organization of work and the

numerous components involved in today's global society. References

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