

Emotional labor

[Business](#), [Employment](#)



Part of the problem with finding a job these days is due to an overabundance of qualified workers. The word "qualified" holds a different meaning now than it did in the past, and to understand this, we need not look further than the kinds of jobs most of us end up doing here in America. We are no longer a nation of builders, but a nation of servers. By this I mean the products of our labor are largely non-physical in nature. They are emotional -- the products that result from the interaction between human beings. Indeed, we may work in the exchange of physical products, but it is the job of the service laborer to attach emotional value to them. Beyond those required for everyday sustenance, the actual material worth of any product is considerably inconsequential compared to its potential emotional value. A decorative chair built overseas and sold at IKEA will probably not be of better quality than one built by a skilled craftsman, but if the IKEA chair looks as though it's been built by a skilled craftsman and is marketed effectively, consumers will believe that they are getting a high-end product at a great price. which in turn leads to greater sales. As we all know, getting a deal on something of adequate quality is often more desirable than paying full price for high quality. There's a reason why McDonald's has sold billions of burgers, after all. The point here is that the qualifications of the skilled laborer have been devalued as a result of outsourcing, and to fill the void once occupied by skilled laborers, we have shifted our economy and workforce towards creating emotional value for products that have very little material value to begin with. So what kind of person is qualified to work in this service-based, emotionally driven economy? Practically everyone. Every human being is skilled in the manipulation of emotion in one way or

another, as it is something we learn how to do almost immediately upon birth. By the time we reach the age when we begin to look for work, our emotional intelligence is at least advanced enough to allow us to work with others towards mutual goals. In service-related fields, what these "goals" are do not particularly matter, for in order to be successful, all one really has to do is learn how to attach the proper emotional quality to whatever action he or she may be performing to achieve the desired result. But these days emotional aptitude is not enough to become or remain employed -- again, there are simply too many qualified individuals in this regard. As a result, employers have created a kind of qualification that one must meet in order to be considered a viable candidate for employment: one of total commitment to company values. The consequence of this for both workers and jobseekers alike is emotional labor. Emotional labor was first defined by the noted sociologist Arlie Hochschild in her book, *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*, as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display." It's essentially putting on an act to affect the emotional state of others in a way that meets the expectations of an employer. Naturally, all employers expect their workers to obey company rules and procedures, but emotional labor goes beyond simply following the rules, as it requires individuals to alter their personality into one that is company-approved, one that is often far different from their usual disposition. When a company-approved personality conflicts with one's actual personality, a worker can easily be perceived as being inauthentic, and this inauthenticity has a way of invalidating the exchanges that take place between themselves and others. For example, a few months ago my

debit card number was stolen and someone purchased \$200 worth of merchandise at a Target in North Carolina. My bank notified me of this and directed me to their claims department. The representative I spoke with was pleasant enough, but she kept saying, " I do apologize" over and over again. Now I knew that it was part of her job to act sympathetic, but the fact that she was so bad at it made dealing with her an annoyance. I could tell that she was not really sorry about what had happened to me, but really, why should she have been? Eventually I told her, " Look, I'm not going to get mad or yell at you. You don't need to keep apologizing." To which she replied, " I do apologize." The experience was so aggravating that I almost didn't care about getting my stolen money back so long as I could put an end to the conversation. Another example that comes to mind is the time I went to buy a new printer at the now-defunct Circuit City a few years back. While browsing, I was approached by someone who could best be described as the real life incarnation of Gil Gunderson from The Simpsons. He was extremely jittery and obviously desperate for a sale. He asked what kind of printer I was looking for. I pointed out the model I was looking at, but expressed my concerns about it as I had just read a review stating that it had a tendency to be streaky when using certain kinds of paper. " Ours won't do that. The ones we stock are fine," he said nervously, indicating that he was full of shit. " Umm, if a product is inherently defective, it's not going to be magically fixed once it enters this store," I said. Had the salesman been a good actor, he might have been able to manipulate my emotions enough to convince me to buy the printer, but since he was talking out of his ass, I felt spiteful and denied him the sale. Looking back, I kind of feel bad. The salesman probably

needed that sale, perhaps to pay the bills or even to keep his job. His work was clearly forcing him to be someone he was not, and his inauthenticity was clearly detrimental to his work. I'm generally not a spiteful person, so in a way, my expectation of how he should of acted as a salesperson (as defined by Circuit City) turned me into someone that I'm not: someone equally inauthentic. Emotional labor is not only directed outward towards the consumer, it is also directed inward towards the work environment itself. Workers are required to meet the expectations of their employers in their interactions with coworkers. Virtually nothing of real substance is ever said around the water cooler. Since the veneer of professionalism must be maintained at all times, one never truly knows whom they are working with. By the same token, one never truly knows whom they are working for. Employers also do a fair share of emotional labor, in that they often pretend to care about the opinions of their employees. Brainstorming sessions are a good example of this. I have worked for a number of large companies in the past, and whenever management started to see the beginnings of dissent among the employees, we would have an office party out of the blue, followed by a brainstorming session. While it appeared that the higher-ups wanted us to participate in helping the company make the " big decisions" and bring about positive change, these meetings were designed merely for the purpose of pacification. Yet still, they were done in such a way that we actually believed we were helping to make a difference... even if we all knew in the back of our minds that all would go back to business-as-usual. Ultimately, emotional labor is often more difficult than the actual job in which it is performed, for it does not end once we leave the workplace. It leaks into

our personal lives and adds fuel to our anxiety. We are not paid for this extra labor, but we are expected to cope with it if we want to continue earning a living. The tragedy of emotional labor lies within its ability to completely transform an individual from an autonomous human being into a "true champion of the company," someone who equates their position in society with their own existence. But the fact of the matter is that every job requires at least some acting. That said, we should never forget that what we expect of ourselves should always outweigh the expectations set upon us by others when it comes to defining our identity. In the end it doesn't really matter what you do for a living, so long as you are able to remain who you are to the greatest extent possible at the end of the day, so when someone asks you what you do for a living, you can reply, "I am myself."