

CONNECTION

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EDITORIAL MEMO

About 70 years ago, German film director Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* portrayed the city of the year 2000 with masses of workers enslaved by machines, toiling for the pleasure of decadent executives. In the 1960s, author Michael Harrington and others speculated that machines — controlled by computers — might abolish work. Today, with a little less angst, but under the heavy pressure of global competition, many in New England and across the United States are asking new questions about how management relates to labor, how man relates to machine — and more generally, about how we work.

This issue's "Cover Stories" by Robert Kuttner, Ira Magaziner and Sven Groenings et al shed light on the ongoing reassessment of the daily grind. Articles by Charles Kolb and Robert Wood tell us the oak and overstuffed chairs of law offices and universities provide no refuge from this rethinking of work.

Though there is disagreement on precisely how to improve the workplace, there is some agreement that success will begin with humans "working smart." It is true that machines don't call in sick, complain or organize for higher wages and better working conditions. But, for the most part, they don't offer good new ideas or anticipate problems, either. New England, with its lack of natural resources, is particularly dependent on smart workers who can exploit advanced technologies, rather than letting technologies exploit them.

Working smart, however, requires an overhaul of work organizations. Most U.S. companies are vertical, with a small number of decision-makers at the top and a large number of non-decision-makers at the bottom doing routine, repetitive tasks. But experts say the most effective work organizations flatten out the hierarchy. In these organizations, "frontline" workers are expected to make judgments, recommendations and decisions to ensure efficiency and quality. As decision-making authority is spread downward and outward in the modern workplace, managers will have to treat workers as equals, seeking and accepting their input. Because of changing workforce demographics, much of that input will come from women, minorities and older people, making the adjustment even more difficult for the most hidebound managers.

Unfortunately, two factors threaten to make working smart as fantastic as Lang's vision. One, workers — if they are to be relied upon — must have the knowledge and skills to improve production processes and the ability to work together to solve problems. Yet, many American workers lack the basic skills needed to read information from computer terminals and enter data correctly, let alone the ability to, say, weigh alternative production processes. Two, most employers know neither which skills to demand nor how to use them. And when they do discern a gap between the skills they need and those available in the labor force, many employers tend to view worker training as a cost, rather than an investment. In bad economic times like today's, most employers choose layoffs over skills upgrading. If we are to work smart, it seems, workers have a lot to learn, and old-line employers have a lot to "unlearn."

Clearly, 1992 New England should provide an attentive audience for new ideas about work life. Between the first quarter of 1989 and the third quarter of 1991, unemployment in the region rose steadily from 3.3 percent to 8.2 percent, and the share of the jobless who experienced unemployment for 15 or more straight weeks grew apace. On the heels of rising unemployment have followed plummeting consumer confidence, rising bankruptcy and increasing out-migration.

Of course, New England could choose the alternative to working smart: emphasizing docile workers, weak unions and low taxes. Kuttner calls it "working cheap." Horace Mann might call it "stupendous folly." □

John O. Harney is the editor of CONNECTION.