



Fast Food, Fast Talk: Service Work and the Routinization of Everyday Life

By Robin Leidner

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Attending Hamburger University, Robin Leidner observes how McDonald's trains the managers of its fast-food restaurants to standardize every aspect of service and product. Learning how to sell life insurance at a large midwestern firm, she is coached on exactly what to say, how to stand, when to make eye contact, and how to build up Positive Mental Attitude by chanting "I feel happy! I feel terrific!"

Leidner's fascinating report from the frontlines of two major American corporations uncovers the methods and consequences of regulating workers' language, looks, attitudes, ideas, and demeanor. Her study reveals the complex and often unexpected results that come with the routinization of service work.

Some McDonald's workers resent the constraints of prescribed uniforms and rigid scripts, while others appreciate how routines simplify their jobs and give them psychological protection against unpleasant customers. Combined Insurance goes further than McDonald's in attempting to standardize the workers' very selves, instilling in them adroit maneuvers to overcome customer resistance.

The routinization of service work has both poignant and preposterous consequences. It tends to undermine shared understandings about individuality and social obligations, sharpening the tension between the belief in personal autonomy and the domination of a powerful corporate culture.

Richly anecdotal and accessibly written, Leidner's book charts new territory in the sociology of work. With service sector work becoming increasingly important in American business, her timely study is particularly welcome.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Leidner (sociology, Univ. of Pennsylvania) uses participant observation to explore aspects of service-industry efforts to insure sameness of effort and routinization of work. The author chooses for examples the ubiquitous McDonald's and the Combined Insurance Company, whose founder, W. Clement Stone, formulated the Positive Mental Attitude (PMA). Both companies achieve service provider-service recipient relationships that are routinized yet acceptable both to the customer and employee. The much-touted "worker rebellions" are largely nonexistent; many if not most employees prefer a well-choreographed approach to the point of sale. Leidner's book includes much of interest to students of business and human behavior, but her turgid prose does not lend itself to easy reading. For academic libraries.

- *Norman Lederer, Thaddeus Stevens State Sch. of Technology, Lancaster, Pa.*

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About the Author

Robin Leidner is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania.

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