

IMPROVING PRODUCTIVITY VIA QWL CENTERS

BY MARION T. BENTLEY
AND GARY B. HANSEN

*"Something important has happened to productivity. I don't know what it is . . . but it is very bad."*¹

After a quarter century of growth and prosperity, Americans and citizens of the industrialized world face a decade of "lowered rising expectations." Herman Kahn, a noted futurist, predicts the coming decade will be known as the "sobering '80s," a period described as an *epoque of malaise* — we're not sick and we're not well — but we certainly feel more than a vague degree of uneasiness.² The arrival of the 1980s has been accompanied by such burdensome economic baggage as rapid price increases, escalating interest rates, slow growth and slackening innovation, capital shortages, public policy indifference or hostility to business, decline of the work ethic, shifts in worker values and expectations, and a further erosion of already low productivity. Figure 1 presents a graphic portrayal of what has been "happening" to U.S. productivity in the past decades.

Given the importance of productivity improvement in the fight against inflation and unemployment, the recent trend in the industrial world is worrisome. Many partial and largely unsatisfactory explanations for the slowing of productivity growth have been suggested. Some experts feel that diminishing technological innovation and capital investment are to blame. The influx of women, youth and the economically disadvantaged to the labor market in the seventies has been identified as deterrents to productivity growth, primarily because of their low skill and experience levels. In the U.S., there are widely and strongly held beliefs that flagging U.S. productivity is at least partially due to the increasing cost to business of government health, safety and environmental regulations. Still others feel that traditional hierarchical management structures and practices are incapable of stimulating further gains.

It has become increasingly clear that the only real alternative to improving productivity growth in

this country is to give up some of our most cherished economic ideas and aspirations, chief among them our current standard of living and future expectations for our children and grandchildren. Thus, we have no acceptable options other than to increase rates of productivity improvement at all levels and in all sectors of our economy. This commitment to productivity growth has become almost an economic article of faith for the business and industrial world and is embraced widely.³ The implementation of that article of faith, however, is a different story entirely. What has emerged is a clear need to reorient government policies to ease the costly burden of over-regulation, to encourage saving and investment, to stimulate growth, and to provide the incentive, rationale and the encouragement to develop productivity improvement programs at the firm and industry levels.

William M. Batten, chairman of the New York Stock Exchange, developed that notion further and encourages:

" . . . A successful national pro-

organizations.

Others, such as the Ohio Quality of Working Life Program, the Utah State University Center for Productivity and Quality of Working Life, and the Center for Quality of Working Life at UCLA, evolved out of more broadly based units within universities. Still others came into existence as a result of the vision and concern of a wealthy benefactor, such as the David Lincoln Foundation which endowed the Productivity Institute at Arizona State University. At least one center, the Georgia Productivity Center, was created by a state legislature in recognition of the importance of productivity to a sound, stable economy.

In an effort to examine the work-life improvement efforts going on around America, the National Center for Productivity and Quality of Working Life convened a national conference in 1976. The meeting indicated that the nascent centers were engaged in a wide variety of activities, and reflected their diverse interests, sponsorship and

objectives. Some were engaged in training, others were concentrating on research. Some were focused on work-life improvement, others emphasized productivity improvement. And while individual views varied, a consensus emerged on three main points:

- The commitment of both labor and management to joint productivity/work quality programs remained limited. There was misunderstanding and mistrust on both sides. Both saw threats of third-party incursion on their prerogatives.

- However, demand already outstripped the capacity of existing productivity/work quality centers to assist management and labor in developing programs. Both professional talent and funds were lacking, and no immediate improvement was likely.

- More information-sharing was needed among both centers and the various regions of the United States. Furthermore, a more formalized organization needed to be established, with regional or na-

tional meetings, review conferences, and the like, held periodically.

Labor-Management Committees

Parallel with the emergence of these centers around the country, there was a renaissance of the labor-management committee (LMC) movement which had been so extensive and successful during World War II. This time, however, there was a merging of concern for economic development in declining or stagnant communities with the problems incident to labor-management conflict and alienation. Thus, communities such as Jamestown and Buffalo, N.Y.; Lock Laven, Pa.; and Muskegon, Mich. were stimulated to organize area-wide labor management committees to strengthen the economy of their communities. Many of these groups initially had, or soon developed, a productivity and quality of work life improvement focus as a major part of their overall efforts.

The National Center for Productivity and Quality of Working Life, acting to fulfill the objectives stated in Public Law 93-311 (and continued in PL 94-136) "to help increase the productivity of the American economy and to help improve the morale and quality of the American worker," made every effort to encourage and promote the activities of the Productivity and Quality of Working Life Centers, and the creation of labor-management committees at the plant, industry, community and regional level.

After observing the extensive outreach activity and work of several of the state and regional centers during the 1976-77 period, National Center staff came to the conclusion that there was a need for a delivery system consisting of a well-developed network of state and/or regional centers located strategically throughout the country. These centers could serve as front-line research, extension and technical assistance units to promote productivity and quality of working life improvement efforts. They could assist in developing in-plant LMC's, help start additional area wide LMC's, urge the adoption of techniques to improve pro-

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ductivity, and work to improve the quality of work life in organizations at all levels. The models of the Utah Center and several of the other centers were seen as prototypes of what was needed if we were to have a meaningful national effort of productivity and quality of working life improvement in America.

Unfortunately, just as the initial steps were being taken by the National Center to begin implementing their overall design for a coherent national system of productivity and quality of working life centers, the rug was pulled out from under these efforts. It was announced in early 1978 that the Carter administration had decided not to seek the renewal of the legislation to extend the life of the National Center. This move, based upon recommendations from the Office of Management and Budget, and Departments of Commerce and Labor, sounded the death knell to the first significant attempt to establish a coherent national effort to increase productivity improvement in the U.S. since World War II.

The National Center for Productivity and Quality of Working Life was not able to accomplish all of its objectives during its short life for a number of reasons. First, it was given a large number of responsibilities and only a pittance of resources or authority to carry them all out. Second, it faced a general lack of support from the Executive Branch of the government. Third, it never developed a large vocal constituency which could serve as its advocate before the administration and Congress. Fourth, it generated considerable rivalry from old line established federal bureaucracies which did not want to share what they considered to be their turf with an upstart newcomer. There were also management and organizational problems which resulted in the National Center lacking a firm overall plan on how it would achieve its objectives, and a system to measure the impact of its programs. Because of these problems the Center was allowed to expire on September 30, 1978.

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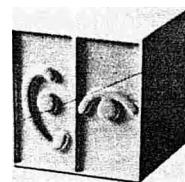
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After the National Center was closed in September, 1978, President Carter issued an executive order establishing the National Productivity Council, to consider productivity issues and coordinate federal programs which support productivity improvement. The Council was to be composed of selected Cabinet secretaries, directors of the Council of Economic Advisors, the Council on Environmental Quality, Civil Service Commission, Office of Science and Technology, and others . . . with the director of the Office of Management and Budget serving as director. The Council is supposed to serve as the focal point in the Executive Branch, "for efforts to improve productivity in the private and public sectors of our economy." They have met only four times since September, 1978.

The irony in this situation lies in the fact that through the Marshall Plan the United States has been largely responsible for the establishment of productivity centers around the world. The devastation

caused throughout Europe by World War II necessitated the rebuilding of the European economy. Through the Marshall Plan, the U.S. exported much of its technology and know-how to European countries and encouraged the establishment of productivity centers to oversee the job of improving productivity in all of Europe. By 1952, all of the European nations had formed such centers. These centers have continued to function and grow even after the withdrawal of U.S. aid in 1961. At this time, virtually every industrialized country in the world, except the U.S., has a national center for productivity improvement.

Centers and The Activities Today

The demise of the National Center did not mean the end of productivity improvement and quality of working life efforts across the country. Fortunately, a substantial number of centers spawned in the 1970s are still in business, helping to foster a continuing interest in these critically important

issues.

Some of these private, non-profit and university-sponsored centers have national coverage; others are regional or local in their geographic coverage. Also, some centers have limited their concern to the technological aspects of productivity and some with improving only quality of work life in unionized organizations. Others are primarily concerned with public sector problems . . . some with the private sector and some with both.

These centers provide a variety of services such as:

- Maintenance of library and reference services;
- Dissemination of productivity improvement and/or quality of working life information through conferences and published material;
- Audio-visual materials which can be used by a group to train employees or managers in productivity/quality of work life improvement;
- Research into new techniques or systems which could improve productivity or the quality of working life;
- Technical assistance to firms and organizations desirous of starting a new productivity and/or quality of work life program;
- Workshops or seminars to train groups of workers, supervisors, managers, and union officials in productivity and quality of work life techniques;
- Appraisals of a firm's or organization's productivity and quality of work life problem areas;
- Documentation and evaluation of productivity and quality of work life projects;
- Consulting on an individual basis; and
- Academic courses and degree programs.

Figure 2 lists the major center locations throughout the United States which are extensively engaged in productivity and/or quality of working life activities and explains what their primary focus or interests are at the present time.

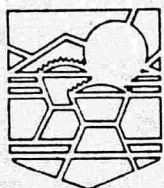
The implications of the development of Productivity and Quality of Working Life Centers for the

(Continued on Page 37)

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Figure 2.

PRODUCTIVITY AND QUALITY OF WORKING LIFE CENTERS IN THE UNITED STATES

Center	Geographical Area of Service and Clientele	Major Interests and Services Offered
American Center for the Quality of Working Life 3301 New Mexico Avenue, N.W. Suite 202 Washington, D.C. 20016 (private non-profit)	Serves national audience. Unionized organizations in the public and private sectors	Main Interest: quality of work life Activities Include: conferences, seminars, consulting
American Productivity Center 1700 West Loop South Houston, TX 77027 (private non-profit)	Serves national audience private sector	Main Interest: productivity Activities: conferences, seminars, research, publications
Center for Productive Public Management John Jay College of Criminal Justice City University of New York 445 West 59th Street New York, NY 10019	Area Served: New York Clientele: public sector	Major Interests: productivity Activities: conferences, seminars, library, reference, information, research, publications
Center for Quality of Working Life Institute of Industrial Relations University of California 405 Hilgard Avenue Los Angeles, CA 90024	Area Served: Regional/national Clientele: private & public sectors	Major Interests: quality of work life Activities: conferences, seminars, consulting, library, reference, information, publications, academic courses & degrees, research
Georgia Productivity Center Engineering Experiment Station Georgia Institute of Technology Atlanta, GA 30332	Area Served: Georgia Clientele: public & private sectors	Major Interests: productivity/technology Activities: conferences, seminars, consulting, research, publications, library, reference, information

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Harvard Project on Technology, Work, and Character 1710 Connecticut Ave. N.W. Washington, D.C. 20009	Area Served: limited/national Clientele: public and private sectors	Major Interests: quality of work life Activities: consulting
Management and Behavioral Science Center Wharton School University of Pennsylvania Vance Hall, 3788 Spruce St. Philadelphia, PA 19104	Area Served: Regional Clientele: public & private sectors	Major Interests: quality of work life Activities: conferences, seminars, consulting, research
Manufacturing Productivity Center IIT Center 10 West 35th Street Chicago, IL 60616	Area Served: Illinois Clientele: private sector	Major Interests: productivity, technology Activities: conferences, seminars, consulting, research, library, references, information, publications
Maryland Center for Productivity and Quality of Working Life College of Business and Management University of Maryland College Park, MD 20742	Area Served: Maryland Clientele: public & private sectors	Major Interests: productivity & quality of working life Activities: conferences, seminars, consulting, research, publications, library, references, information
Massachusetts Labor-Management Center 14 Beacon Street Suite 712 Boston, MA 02108 (private, non-profit)	Area Served: Massachusetts Clientele: unionized organizations in the public and private sector	Major Interests: quality of work life Activities: conferences, seminars, consulting
Oklahoma Productivity Institute School of Industrial Engineering and Management Oklahoma State University Stillwater, OK 74074	Area Served: Oklahoma Clientele: public & private sector	Major Interests: productivity, technology Activities: conferences, seminars, research
Penntap Pennsylvania Technical Assistance Program J. Orvis Keller Bldg. Pennsylvania State University University Park, PA 16802	Area Served: Pennsylvania Clientele: public & private sector	Major Interests: productivity, technology Activities: conferences, seminars, consulting, library, reference, information, publications
Productivity Council of the Southwest STF 124 5151 State University Drive Los Angeles, CA 90032 (private non-profit)	Area Served: Southern California Clientele: public & private sector	Major Interests: productivity Activities: conferences, seminars, research, library, references, information
Productivity Institute College of Business Administration Arizona State University Tempe, AZ 84281	Area Served: Metropolitan Phoenix and Arizona Clientele: public & private sector	Major Interests: productivity Activities: conferences, seminars, research, library, references, information
Productivity Research and Extension Program North Carolina State University P.O. Box 5511 Raleigh, NC 27607	Area Served: North Carolina Clientele: public & private sector	Major Interests: productivity, technology Activities: conferences, seminars, research, library, reference, information, publications
Ohio Quality of Working Life Program Center for Human Resource Research Ohio State University 1375 Perry Street, Suite 585 Columbus, OH 43201	Area Served: Ohio Clientele: public & private sector	Major Interests: quality of working life Activities: conferences, seminars, consulting, research, library, reference, information, publications
Quality of Worklife Center for Central Pennsylvania Pennsylvania State University Capitol Campus Middletown, PA 17057 (Continued on Page 37)	Area Served: Central Pennsylvania Clientele: public & private sectors	Major Interests: quality of working life Activities: conferences, seminars, research, library, reference, information

PRODUCTIVITY AND QUALITY OF WORKING LIFE CENTERS IN THE UNITED STATES — Continued

Center	Geographical Area of Service and Clientele	Major Interests and Services Offered
Michigan Quality of Worklife Center Wayne State University Office of Urban Affairs 1072 Mackenzie Hall Detroit, MI 48106	Area Served: Michigan Clientele: unionized industry in the public and private sector	Major Interests: quality of work life Activities: conferences, seminars, consulting, research, publications, library, reference, information
Utah State University Center for Productivity and Quality of Working Life UMC 35 Utah State University Logan, Utah 84322	Area Served: Rocky Mountain Region Clientele: public & private sector	Major Interests: productivity and quality of working life Activities: conferences, seminars, consulting, research, library, reference, information, publications, academic courses, degrees
Work in America Institute 700 White Plains Road Scarsdale, NY 10583	Area Served: National Clientele: public & private sector	Major Interests: productivity and quality of work life Activities: conferences, seminars, library, references, information, publications

This list is not inclusive; it includes only well-established centers known to have substantial currently active programs of service. For a complete listing of those organizations which have, at one time, indicated an interest in serving as a productivity and/or quality of worklife center see **Directory of Productivity and Quality of Working Life Centers** (National Center for Productivity and Quality of Working Life, Washington, D.C. 20036), Fall 1978. For a listing of additional organizations which can serve as resources for those interested in productivity and quality of working life see **Selected U.S. References on Quality of Working Life** (ASTD Task Force, September 1979).

HRD profession extend considerably beyond the mere addition and mention of an interesting footnote to economic history. Rather, these centers offer the potential of a rich and varied resource available to the knowledgeable training and development specialist. Among the services and resources available are the following:

- *Newsletters* announcing new developments, coming events and important additions to the new work-system literature;
- *Case Studies and Information* on productivity improvement experiments and QWL projects;
- *Audio-visual Materials* on specific techniques and experiments such as the introduction of a Scanlon Plan at Midland Ross, labor-management committees at Jamestown, or training supervisors in QWL at General Motors;
- *Conferences, Seminars and Workshops* that cover a variety of topics including awareness programs, the development and management of a productivity improvement project, productivity measurement, gain-sharing techniques, and systems of employee involvement and participation;
- *Personal Growth and Development* through credit courses and classes in such topics as new work systems, socio-technical systems

analysis and design, theory and techniques of training in organizations, and labor-management cooperation at UCLA, Utah State University, and other participating universities and colleges;

- *Consulting* assistance in designing, initiating and maintaining QWL, productivity and labor-management projects;
- *Technical Assistance* in developing new technology, and other technical engineering and manufacturing solutions to productivity problems;
- *Research* of new techniques or approaches to productivity improvement including an appraisal and analysis of productivity and QWL problem areas.

All centers welcome inquiries from firms and organizations interested in assistance or information — fees and available services differ among the various centers. Any individual or organization interested in learning more about productivity improvement or quality of working life is encouraged to contact one or more of the centers listed earlier for additional information.

While the present situation at the national level leaves much to be desired, efforts to improve productivity and the quality of working life have not ceased en-

tirely. We still have a handful of centers located around the country that are diligently working (without much federal encouragement, support or assistance) to do for America what their counterpart centers are doing so effectively in Japan, Germany and the other major industrialized nations of the world.

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3. Batten, W.M., "Commitment to Productivity: An Economic Act of Faith," published speech, November 26, 1979.
4. *Ibid.*

Marion T. Bentley is an extension associate professor of Economics at Utah State University and associate director of the USU Business and Economic Development Services and Center for Productivity and Quality of Working Life. He has consulted with numerous organizations in the U.S., Mexico, South America, and Asia. He serves on ASTD's Task Force on Quality of Work Life.

Gary B. Hansen is professor of Economics at Utah State University and director of the USU Business and Economic Development Services and Center for Productivity and Quality of Working Life.