

Books

No More Time Outs

American Business: A Two-Minute Warning, by C. Jackson Grayson, Jr., and Carla O'Dell

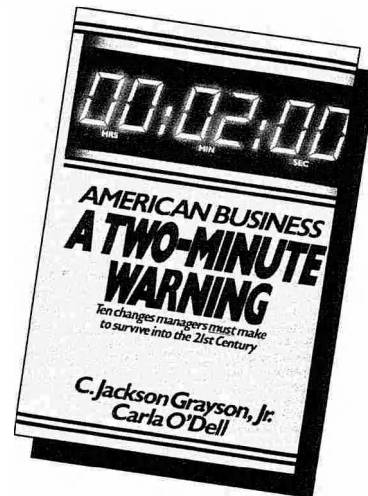
This is a book of challenge and response regarding the "rise and stall" of U.S. economic competitiveness. Growth in domestic productivity and the standard of living has all but halted; imports into the United States are at a record high, while exports in many industries are decreasing. Thus far, the American response has been grossly inadequate, say C. Jackson Grayson, Jr., and Carla O'Dell, authors of *A Two-Minute Warning*.

This book is a warning, to be sure, but it is not an obituary. There is a chance for a comeback, the authors claim—about two minutes' worth in the game of economic revival.

The first sections of the book present a jarring picture of how and why the U.S. has fallen behind. Five causes of the drop in productivity are a lack of international competition in U.S. markets, excessive affluence, American politics and economics, inadequate attention to the human dimension, and an aging nation that has less capacity for change.

The focus of Part IV is on what the private sector can and must do to renew America's competitiveness—and the consequences if it doesn't. As companies react to the competitiveness threat, the authors say that many will experience five stages (almost like the so-called stages of dying)—denial and disbelief, anger, "deal making," retreat, and finally, acceptance and adjustment. The authors present a practical, ten-part "Agenda for Adjustment" for American businesses.

One chapter on training and continuous lifelong learning says the principal ingredients missing in most training programs are rele-



vance and economic education. "The vast majority of employees have virtually no understanding of the economic system, of how productivity, quality, and competitiveness affect their own standard of living and employment security." The authors give examples of some progressive companies that are improving the availability and quality of employee training. Several alternatives to traditional training models provide a measure of hope amid all the doom and gloom.

Part V addresses the role of government in industrial revitalization. The authors contend that government actions too often go after the wrong problems or are inadequate substitutes for real change. Despite the bewildering assortment of mergers, takeovers, and plant closings, these "monetary maneuvers" are yielding frustratingly little in terms of productivity and competitiveness. Part VI takes a look at international competitors (particularly Japan), what they are doing well and not so well, and what the U.S. can learn from other countries.

Throughout the book, the authors draw selectively from past and present leaders—from Adam Smith and his view of laissez-faire economics, to foreign policy statements by Henry Kissinger, to Marshall

McLuhan's call for a global village.

The authors' message to the U.S. is strikingly clear—either grow or decline, but stop floundering in the middle. The writing is straightforward and generally balanced in perspective. The authors intend to hit between the eyes, and they don't miss. The book is a valuable commentary on public policy; it doesn't answer all the questions, but for business leaders and political thinkers, it helps define the questions and issues that deserve prompt attention.

According to the authors, "There are no insurmountable historical, cultural, or technological reasons why America can't renew itself." *A Two-Minute Warning* gives options for what to do and how to do it, but doesn't allow time outs. The book is only for those who are ready for the countdown.

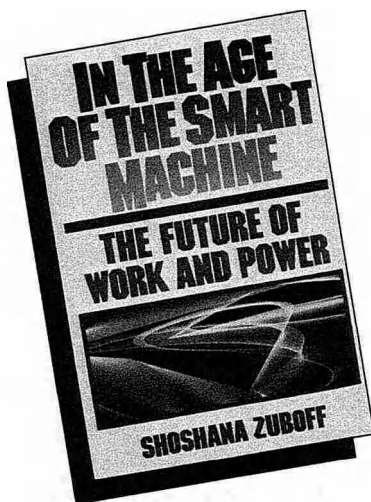
Grayson is chairman of the American Productivity Center in Houston and a former member of economic advisory committees in the Nixon, Carter, and Reagan administrations. O'Dell founded O'Dell & Associates consulting and research firm and is a former senior consultant and vice president of the American Productivity Center.

Automation vs. Information

In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power, by Shoshana Zuboff

In the old days, work was very much a sensory experience. People knew how well they were doing in their jobs based on touch, sight, even smell. "A worker on a paper machine in a pulp mill, for example, could judge the moisture content of a roll by slapping it and literally getting the feel in his fingers," says an article in *U.S. News & World Report*, based on a conversation with Shoshana Zuboff, author of *In the Age of the Smart Machine*.

Books



But the advent of computer technology has replaced the real thing with symbolic electronic data, which leaves less room for human error, but a lot more room for employee burnout, disillusionment, and frustration, says Zuboff. During the last decade, she studied eight organizations that were just moving into the "computer age." People complained to her of losing sight of their work, of losing touch with the meaning of what they were doing. The skills required to decipher electronic information are far different from the more tactile skills of knowing that roll of paper was ready by its firm texture and its rich, pulpy aroma.

This book is about alternative futures. In three parts, Zuboff discusses the three types of choices organizational leaders must make regarding knowledge, authority, and technique, as information technology alters both the nature and experience of work.

In the first "future" (entitled "Knowledge and Computer-Mediated Work" in Part One), organizational leaders can choose to value mechanized intelligence at the expense of the human ability to make critical judgments and logical decisions. In that environment, workers will become dependent, unthinking automatons. Alternatively, leaders can choose to create a workforce that understands data and knows how to manipulate it to add value to products and services.

In the second future (Part Two, "Authority: The Spiritual Dimension of Power"), leaders can choose a work environment that reinforces traditional, hierarchical roles, where employees are expected to obey authority unconditionally. Or, leaders can choose to foster relationships that are more intricate and collaborative. In that kind of atmosphere, managers and workers will learn to "overcome their narrow functional perspectives" and will be mutually

responsible for organizational progress.

In the final future (Part Three, "Technique: The Material Dimension of Power"), leaders can choose a world where technology is used to monitor employees and operations Big Brother-style, while employees are driven to find their own ways of circumventing or sabotaging the system. Or, the new technology can be viewed as a resource for fashioning innovative methods of information sharing and social interaction (for example, computer conferences and interactive video).

By itself, a machine is entirely invested in its product, Zuboff says. Information technology, on the other hand, can produce action, as well as alter the contours of reality as we know it—"work becomes more abstract, intelligence may be programmed, organizational memory and visibility are increased." She has coined the words "automate" and "informate" to express that duality. In an informed environment, technology goes beyond the traditional logic of automation, and "events, objects, and processes become visible, knowable, and shareable in a new way."

In a writing style that is mesmerizing and compelling, Zuboff relates observations from her study. In one

example, workers at a bleach plant demanded automatically closing doors to keep the toxic fumes from escaping. Yet once the expensive, high-tech doors were installed, instead of waiting for the mechanized opener, the men would force their fingers through the rubber seal between the doors and, "with a mighty heft of their shoulders, pry open the seam and wrench the doors apart." Soon the "safety" doors were rendered useless.

In the organizations she studied, "the promise of automation seemed to exert a magnetic force, a seduction that promised to fulfill a dream of perfect control and heal egos wounded by their needs for certainty. The dream contains the image of 'people serving a smart machine,' but in the shadow of the dream, human beings have lost the experience of critical judgment that would allow them to no longer simply respond but to know better than, to question, to say no."

Zuboff, an associate professor at the Harvard Business School, calls her book "a vision of a fruitful future" and "a call for action that can lead us beyond the stale reproduction of the past into an era that offers a historic opportunity to more fully develop the economic and human potential of our work organization."

In the Age of the Smart Machine takes a profound, provocative look at the relationship between the historical, psychological, and organizational forces that shape and dictate our work environment. The result is truly a watershed effort.

Terms of Employment

A Great Place to Work: What Makes Some Employers So Good (And Most So Bad), by Robert Levering

What makes a company a great place to work? The liberal-leave

Books

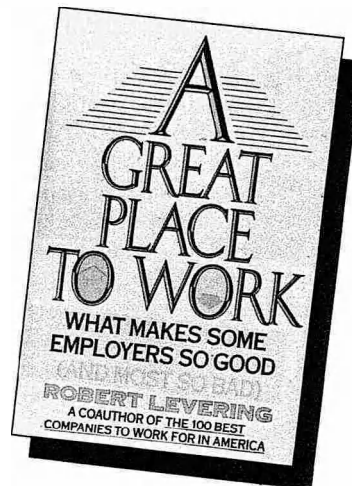
policy, the flexible working hours, the boss's laid-back style? Most of the existing management books share "how-to" tips for managers to use in their own companies, but overlook the specific factors that make a company a good or bad place to work.

In his research for a previous book, *The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America*, Robert Levering asked hundreds of employees what they think about their jobs and their work environments. He says he was surprised to discover how many people really do like their jobs. Yet he wanted to find out why and how some companies are better places to work than others. So, he went back to 20 of the original companies to talk with the employees again. Those perspectives form the backbone of *A Great Place to Work*.

Writing from the employees' points of view, Levering puts a twist on traditional management publications. In this book, he examines the idea of *A Great Place to Work* as an end in itself, not just a means to increase profits or productivity. For many of us, he says, "there's a mismatch between what [we] want to do during our working hours and what we are allowed to do in our workplace. This discrepancy translates, on a personal level, to a profound feeling of alienation. Socially, it represents a tragic waste of human energy."

Drawing on numerous case studies, Levering highlights specific company practices that have been proven good for morale and for business, such as Federal Express's fair-treatment grievance procedure, or IBM's "no lay-off" policy, or Tektronix's unabridged weekly newsletter.

"Good workplaces provide beacons in a fog of mediocrity and insensitivity," Levering writes. "They offer a different vision from the dog-eat-dog, each-man-for-himself,



free-the-entrepreneur philosophy that enjoys widespread currency."

Levering challenges traditional management styles, claiming they can get in the way of employee satisfaction and healthy work environments. He critiques the following:

- Frederick Taylor's scientific, only-the-boss-gets-to-think style, where employees essentially are expected to turn off their brains at the factory door;
- Elmo Mayo's clinical, psychological style, where bosses have more of a doctor/patient relationship with their employees;
- Peter Drucker's elite professional style, where if company profits are at stake, any means justifies the end;
- Tom Peters's manipulative, evangelical style, where employees are converted into workaholics to achieve higher productivity.

Levering thinks "a great workplace is greater than the sum of its parts." He lists some of the ingredients of a healthy work environment—a place where employees are encouraged to participate in the process; where they are recognized as individual thinkers and feeling human beings; where they have a voice in what they do; where mutual trust and quality relationships are cultivated actively; and

where workers truly enjoy the job, the company, and their colleagues. He also discusses four characteristics of bad workplaces—exploitative, mechanical, entrepreneurial, and paternalistic policies and practices—and gives examples of each.

A few chapter titles are "In search of definition: What is a great place to work?" "Can a bad workplace become good?" "The role model that crashed: People Express," "Beyond a workplace of robots," "Spotting bad workplaces: from exploitation to paternalism," "The rise and corruption of the managerial class," "Do nice companies finish last?" and "Toward a new workplace ethic."

Levering includes "real people" comments, such as: ". . . one of the best things about being a machinist or a toolmaker was the freedom to move around [once a machine had been set up] . . . to schmooze with the guys around you—go get coffee, a Coke, or a smoke."

Levering, an experienced labor and business reporter, writes with insight, wit, and objectivity. In *A Great Place to Work*, he has written a highly approachable and readily useful book.

American Business: A Two-Minute Warning. 368 pp. New York, NY: The Free Press, 609/461-6500, \$24.95.

Circle No. 180 on Reader Service Card.

In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power. 468 pp. New York, NY: Basic Books, 212/207-7292, \$19.95.

Circle No. 181 on Reader Service Card.

A Great Place to Work: What Makes Some Employers So Good (And Most So Bad). 312 pp. New York, NY: Random House, 800/638-6460, \$18.95.

Circle No. 182 on Reader Service Card.