

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

Robin Leidner

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Attending Hamburger University, Robin Leidner observes how McDonald's trains the managers of its fastfood 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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