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5

Literacy and Work

Before You Read. Comparing jobs you have had in your life or those of people you know, what were the literacy abilities required in each job? Was each kind of literacy necessary for all situations in each job, or was it limited to particular domains or duties? How might your analysis of literacy demands in jobs you have had and jobs you might assume in your future compare to literacy demands of a previous generation? How have the changing technologies and increasingly global economy affected specific practices of workplace literacy over these generations?

A Tale of Two Workplaces

Imagine the following scenes, the first one overheard in the office cubicles of the marketing department of a small corporation . . .

Laura: Don, you ready for the hatchet job today?

Don: I guess . . .

Laura: Yeah, I know what you mean. All those changes around here the past few months don't exactly inspire confidence. Upper management is looking for another way to "trim the herd." But what can we do? We've got to find a way to write this proposal with them, or it'll be *our* jobs on the line next time, right?

Don: True, but how can we get four other departments to agree to this plan and the language we know it needs to contain? It's hard enough to do it with our own team, much less 30 people. And when legal gets ahold of it, you know we're going to have to rewrite it again, for the fifth time, as I recall.

Laura: Yeah, well, see you in there. We'll find a way to make it work, we have before. I'm off for coffee, gotta pump myself up somehow.

And now on a manufacturing shop floor, we overhear two machine operators on their break...

Lev: I hear they want to retrain us again.

Alex: And redo the teams.

Lev: Yeah, Carl just called another meeting for next week, on our time too. We still have to make the same quota, don't they ever think about that? Whaddya think they're bitchin' about this time?

Alex: Bev in processing says they still don't like our team's paperwork, that it don't give enough detail about the "quality control."

Lev: Well, hell, that's not what we were hired for, was it? And besides, we got a new kid on the shift. He's had some problems, but he's alright. If we wrote down all they wanted on those forms and that computer screen, it would make him and our team look bad. It's not our fault that the vendors can't get the plates to us in time to keep up with this new quota.

Alex: I hear ya, man. I thought these teams were supposed to give us more control over our jobs. It worked for them over in assembly. Why don't Carl and those others just let us use our own notes rather than those stinkin' manuals?

What do these two scenes have in common? Both conversations reflect the workplace changes in literacy created by the knowledge economy and practices of total quality management, which we will examine in this chapter.

In this chapter, we will take a look at how workplace literacy has changed over the past 20 years in the corporation and on the manufacturer's shop floor. Using ethnographic studies of workplaces and examples from movies and television, we will examine how these changes may affect your future work and the work world around you. You will learn to:

- Identify the role *literacy sponsors* play in the changing literacies at work.
- Examine how the *knowledge economy*, globalization, and flexible capitalism shape the kinds of literacy practices often emerging in corporate and factory workplaces of the 21st century.
- Weigh the advantages and drawbacks of the teamwork increasingly expected in these workplace literacies.
- Recognize and analyze specific tensions between opportunity and accountability for workers that emerge from employers' expectations for literacy in 21st-century workplaces.

When most people think of workplace literacy, they generally think of how to write better business memos, read machine manuals, or create good PowerPoint presentations. But just as we saw in Chapter Four how economic issues can influence opportunities and limitations of literacy, these influences play an even more direct role when literacies are directly tied to the economic marketplace. Similarly, as we saw concerns of culture, capital, and power in the literacy practices of the groups we discussed in Chapter Three, we will see how groups within corporate and industry workplaces also negotiate, adapt, or resist literacy practices in response to their employers' expectations.

Literacy Sponsorship

At first look, the literacy issues playing out within today's corporate and factory workplaces may seem far apart. Even so, literacy scholar Deborah Brandt's (1998) concepts of *literacy sponsorship* and *economies of literacy learning* can help us see the economic and political forces in the larger global society that are driving these continual changes in the cubicles and on the shop floors. Brandt defines *sponsors of literacy* as "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress or withhold literacy, and gain advantage in some way" (p. 166). So we can certainly count most teachers and schools as literacy sponsors, but consider also churches, community organizations, and government programs as well. Equally important, we need to think of literacy sponsorship at the macro level of institutions—such as, in this case, multinational corporations—as well as individuals who influence how, what, and when we read and write various kinds of texts.

Brandt's research seeks to understand the multiple effects of large-scale literacy sponsors on individuals' uses of literacy in their everyday lives. To this end, Brandt talks about economies of literacy development where large-scale literacy sponsors, like the Protestant Church in England before the formation of public schools or the U.S. Army in World War II, "are engaged in ceaseless processes of positioning and repositioning, seizing and

Definition

Literacy Sponsors

Any group, institution, or corporation that enables, regulates, or withholds literacy learning for individuals

Economies of Literacy Learning

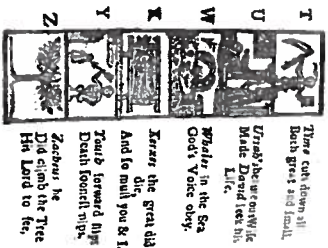
The economic forces that influence institutions and companies to sponsor particular goals of literacy learning

relinquishing control over meanings and materials of literacy as part of their participation in economic and political competition" (p. 173).

In the case of Protestant Sunday schools, they offered basic reading to teach the working classes to read their bibles, but the working classes often demanded further schooling in an effort to gain upward mobility. In the case of World War II, the new technologies of warfare required more complex literacy skills, so the army created the largest ever adult literacy program to meet this immediate need. But consider also how nation-states may sponsor literacy learning to compete for political and economic power. For instance, in the 1960s, the United States heavily funded new opportunities for scientific education in an effort to beat the "space race" after the Soviets launched *Sputnik* in 1957.

In this first decade of the 21st century, consider how often schools organize student projects and activities as collaborative teamwork in preparation for the kinds of teamwork expected now by corporations to meet demands of global competition. Very often businesses and business-supported organizations are the co-sponsors of these approaches to school curriculum, whether through public advocacy or grant monies. Brandt points out that large-scale literacy sponsors "lend their resources or credibility to the sponsored" in an effort "to gain benefits" from the sponsor's success (p. 167). From this view we can see how literacy practices and behaviors act as commodities to trade, buy, or sell. This view of literacy as an economic commodity takes on more importance in the knowledge economy, where a person's acts of literacy make knowledge-making a tangible economic property (as we will see later on).

Through her interviews with 80 people about their literacy histories in the 20th century, Brandt concluded that the economic and social structures of literacy sponsorship influence: class and race stratification,



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economic and ideological competition, and reappropriation of literacy practices by the sponsored.

Class and Race Stratification

When Brandt analyzed these people's patterns of literacy sponsorship, she found that people from higher social class positions and more privileged racial backgrounds had repeated access to many and various kinds of literacy sponsors. People from poorer and less socially and economically privileged racial backgrounds often had "less consistent, less politically secured access to literacy sponsors, especially to the ones that can grease their way to academic and economic success" (1998, p. 170).

As an example, Brandt contrasts the patterns of literacy sponsorship of two

students who attended the same midwestern university. Raymond Branch is a White student with a professor father and a real-estate-executive mother. Dora Lopez is a Mexican American student whose father worked as a university shipping clerk and whose mother worked part-time in a bookstore. Raymond had access to the university's computer technologies through his father's job long before going to college. He also enjoyed access to the emerging market of computer stores supporting the university and growing local high-tech market.

In contrast, Dora encountered difficulties nurturing her interest in biliteracy, as there were few Spanish speakers and scarce Spanish print media available to her growing up in this university town. At age 13, she began to learn some computer skills through a teaching assistantship in a summer school program for children of migrant workers. Compared to Raymond, whose parents gave him his own computer when he was 12, Dora received a used word-processing machine from her father when she went to college.

Brandt concludes that Raymond's "literacy skills were underwritten by late century transformations in communication technology that created a boomtown need for programmers" (1998, p. 172). But Dora's "biliterate skills [that she uses in her job with a cleaning company while finishing school at a technical college] developed and paid off much

<p>Key Idea</p> <p><i>Literacy Sponsorship Influences</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • class and race stratification • economic and social competition • reappropriation of literacy skills

literacy as commodity

further down the economic reward ladder in government-sponsored youth programs and commercial enterprises that, in the 1990s, were absorbing surplus migrant workers into a low wage, urban service economy.”

Economic and Ideological Competition

Brandt’s research reveals how forms of literacy, and individuals’ experiences with these forms, “are created out of competition between institutions” (1998, p. 173). To detail this claim, Brandt describes how the expectations of literacy at work changed for Dwayne Lowery, an auto worker and water meter reader turned public employee’s union representative. In the early 1970s, Lowery received training (sponsorship) from the union to learn contract negotiation. At first, he negotiated primarily with part-time public officials who were not as well trained as the union negotiators. But as the power of the public employee’s unions grew in the 1980s, due also to the rise of the information and service economy, the municipal government officers brought in lawyers to take their place at the bargaining table.

Where once Lowery used his oral negotiating skills as much as his writing abilities, now all procedures were conducted in writing and legal discourse. Consequently, Lowery had to continually take training courses to keep up with the government lawyers. “Lowery saw his value to the union bureaucracy subside as power shifted to younger, university trained staffers whose literacy credentials better matched the specialized forms of escalating pressure coming from the other side” (Brandt, 1998, p. 176). As Brandt points out, Lowery was swept up in the rise of what political scientists call an “advanced contractarian society” at the latter half of the 20th century, particularly in labor relations following the civil rights period “when a flurry of federal and state civil rights legislation curtailed the previously unregulated hiring and firing power of management” (p. 177). This case study suggests how new standards of literacy arise from the struggles of competition, as here between unions and management.

Reappropriation of Literacy Practices by the Sponsored

As our discussion of how market-driven literacy sponsorship can exacerbate social inequities and economic competition suggests, many literacy sponsors may seek to control or channel the literacy practices they promote within workplaces and other institutional settings. Nonetheless,

very little prevents the recipients of that sponsorship using some of that sponsored literacy learning in other parts of their lives. In other words, workers can often find ways to divert the resources of the sponsored literacy practices to their own needs outside the office doors.

To illustrate this concept of reappropriation of learned literacy practices, Brandt focuses on two examples of female secretaries, a job role historically with little economic or official power. Carol White borrowed what she learned about persuasive skills in writing from her boss, a vice-president of a company that produced Catholic missionary films. Outside of work, Carol used these persuasive techniques to craft convincing stories for her own missionary work as a Jehovah’s Witness. Later in her job as a municipal revenue clerk, she also enrolled in a sponsored training course in persuasive communication, which she then used to further augment her evangelical work.

Similarly, Sarah Steele picked up the principles of budgeting from her employer’s law firm and learned to apply those principles to the management of her lower-middle-class family household. She also learned much about the genre of the credit report to help her family with financing, and learned from typing documents of civil suits what local businesses not to hire for house repairs. Sarah’s comment to Brandt suggests the sense of regained social power when the sponsored take their literacy gains out of the institutions: “‘It just changes the way you think,’ she observed about the reading and writing she did on her job, ‘You’re not a pushover after you learn how business operates.’” (Brandt, 1998, p. 181). In fact, it is precisely the reappropriation of literacy practices learned in the workplace that concerns executive management in the marketplace of the knowledge economy, as we shall discuss more fully later in this chapter.

What’s Changed in Our Economy and Ways of Doing Business?

The Role of Corporate Memos in the 1980s

Brandt’s concept of literacy sponsorship can help us better see what’s at stake for worker literacies in the emergence of the knowledge economy. We can observe an element of this transformation to a knowledge economy in a scene from *The Secret of My Success* (1987) and then in the movie *Office Space* (1999). In the contrast between these two movies, we can see how

the meaning and purposes of office memos changed in just over a decade. *The Secret* shifts from a manufacturing economy to an information economy. Ten years later, *Office Space* satirizes the deep effects of that economic shift for the average cubicle worker, as we shall soon examine.

In *The Secret of My Success*, Brantley (Michael J. Fox) is a business college graduate stuck in a mailroom job trying to work his way up the corporate ladder. In the decade before email, he soon learns which office mail items are executive memos intended only for other executives. As his friend in the mailroom tells him, “all the white ones are a bunch of suits talking to themselves.” Secretly reading over these memos intended only for the “suits,” Brantley finds all the problems within the chain of command. He comments that the memos list the right job titles but “the job assignments and objectives are all screwed up.” Armed with the information from the memos, he covertly masquerades as an executive to develop his plan that ultimately saves the company from a hostile takeover. When Brantley is confronted along the way by a higher executive who doesn’t recognize him, the executive chastises someone who is one rung down on the command chain for not informing him about this new executive hire:

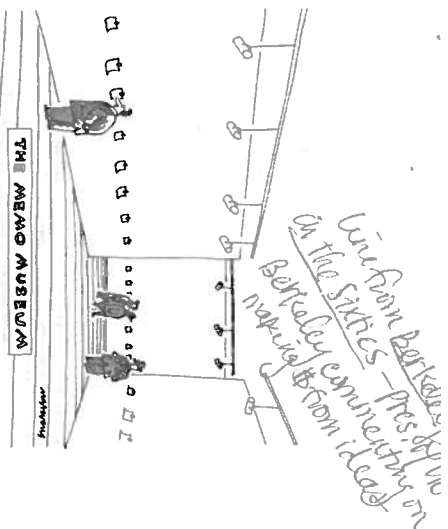
Executive: (to his underling) I didn’t get a memo on that.

Brantley: (quickly replying) Oh, you will.

Executive: Well, alright. As long as I get the memo.

In the next scene, Brantley proceeds to send another memo out from the mailroom to make his role official.

This importance of the memos as the key to corporate control shows how office writing helped maintain the social hierarchy of corporations in the period after World War II up to the mid-1980s. The social hierarchy of management and power in large corporations, like General Motors or Proctor and Gamble, tended toward a highly graduated pyramid



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with several layers of middle management before reaching the executive elite at the top of the pyramid. Consequently, chains of command and accountability were more rigid and openly acknowledged.

Management and Workplace Writing Before the Information Economy

Employees were more likely to write memos, reports, and proposals as individuals within their particular rank and section of the company, and then hand the drafts to managers above them. Most companies focused on the manufacturing of a mass-market product, such as a general brand of soap or an insurance policy, rather than on the process of developing and serving niche markets of specific kinds of customers. Because there was more standardization of mass-market products, workplace writing tended to be far less regulated by government agencies or associations representing the corporations’ legal interests. Overall, companies viewed workers’ loyalties to their corporations as vital to each company’s growth and sought to maintain those loyalties through benefits packages and other improvements to the workers’ quality of life. In return, workers generally reciprocated this loyalty to their workplaces.

Within the blue-collar work of manufacturing in this same time period, most factories micromanaged the division of labor among workers. The assembly line model of work associated with Henry Ford required each worker to repeatedly perform his or her same individual task along the production line. The movie *Gung Ho* (1986) depicts the change that occurred in manufacturing styles and distribution of labor in American auto manufacturing that came with the global economy that began in the 1980s. At the beginning of the movie, we see auto workers in a Pennsylvania automotive factory each doing their individual job on the line, never needing to read and write anything on the job. As a Japanese company buys out the factory,

Key Idea

The Transformation from Manufacturing Economy to Knowledge Economy

- pyramid hierarchies of management to flattened hierarchies
- mass product to niche markets
- standardization to quality of production processes
- individual work to working in teams

All of these are changes requiring *more* writing and documentation.

however, we see the autoworkers' jobs change and require more documentation of manufacturing processes.

In most factory settings before the late 1980s and early 1990s, management and the foremen beneath them only demanded high quotas of production—such as how many razors or shaving cream cans per hour. Consequently, workers did not need to concern themselves with the quality or process of the mass commodity the factory churned out—there was little need to continually modify that razor or shaving cream can for changing consumer markets. And so there was little need for the workers to document their work or to use literacy skills to improve the process of production. In addition, the workers understood clear lines of authority and management, and often lines of power between unions and management. The managers, engineers, and designers in their separate hall of offices thought about the production processes and the foremen on the factory floor pushed the workers to put the product out.

Memos Today in the Information Economy:

It's Everybody's Business

So what changed since the 1970s, and why have those changes produced such a profound impact on demands for different literacy practices in workplaces? To examine these changes, let's now compare the hierarchical distribution of memos in *The Secret of My Success* to the 1990s, film *Office Space*. In the first scenes of the movie, Peter Gibbons (Ron Livingston), who works in a cubicle at Initech, a software company, is bugged by three different bosses and some of his co-workers about the TPS memo.

First

Lumbergh: Hello, Peter. What's happening?

(Lumbergh doesn't wait for Peter to respond)

We have sort of a problem. You didn't put one of the new cover sheets on your TPS reports.

Peter: Yeah. I'm sorry about that. I forgot.

Lumbergh: We're putting the cover sheets on all TPS reports before they go out. Did you see the memo about this?

Peter: Yeah. I have the memo right here. I just forgot. But it's not going out till tomorrow, so there's no problem.

Lumbergh: Yeah, if you could just make sure . . . you do that from now on, that would be great. I'll make sure you get another copy of that memo, okay?

Peter: No I have the memo right here. (Lumbergh moves off talk to another employee)

Later again another one of Peter's bosses approaches his cubicle

Dom: Hi Peter, what's happening? We need to talk about your TPS reports.

Peter: I know. I know. Bill talked to me about it.

Dom: Did you get that memo?

Peter: Yeah. I got it. I understand the policy. The problem is that I just forgot one time. I took care of it, so end of problem.

Dom: It's just that we're putting new cover sheets on all the TPS reports before they go out so if you could just remember that from now on, that would be great.

(Dom exits as Peter reacts with irritation—his phone rings)

Peter: Peter Gibbons (Peter listens, then reacts) Yes. I have the memo.

And finally with his buddies Michael and Samir

Michael: Speaking of problems, what happened with your TPS reports?

Samir: Yeah, didn't you get the memo?

Compared to the hierarchical distribution of writing in *The Secret of My Success*, *Office Space* parodies the circulation of writing in teams. Here, the cultural assumption is that *everyone* must read the memo and be reminded about it several times over. When it comes to the circulation of writing, there is no clear hierarchy, and many people can be your boss.

The Effects of Total Quality Management on Workplace Literacies

We can find the origins of these changes in our economy of literacy labor starting in the 1970s. At that time, mass-produced consumer goods from mainly U.S. manufacturers were saturating the markets in industrialized

nations. Meanwhile, Japanese companies were successfully competing for unprecedented portions of these consumer markets though management styles focused on the quality of the production process. Ironically, it was an American, W. Edwards Deming, when working with Japanese industries in the 1950s, who created the business approach of "Total Quality Management" that set the stage for the global hyper-competition that workers often face today.

Deming argued that the most important aim of any business is the customer's continuing satisfaction. Seeing business from this view, companies should emphasize continually improving the various processes of design and manufacturing that add value to the customer's satisfaction. In theory, this approach then assumes that workers closer to the actual production of the product or service, rather than the middle management, may know best how to repeatedly improve the quality of the manufacturing or service process because they deal the most with these everyday concerns. This is why Peter is repeatedly asked about the memo. Management assumes his and his coworkers' input is necessary to maintain quality management. In practice, however, whether the management of a business will fully act on this assumption and carry it through in an ethical manner with workers depends on the social contexts and power dynamics of each individual workplace, as the examples of workplace studies in this chapter will show.

If we turn again from corporate employees to the factory workers, we can see how the "total quality" approach also favors teams of workers involved in whole processes of manufacturing rather than the individual, isolated tasks of the assembly line. In the movie *Gung Ho*, the owners of the automotive factory are about to close the plant due to global competition. Later, after a Japanese auto firm buys the factory, everyone is carrying around clipboards, constantly reading and writing. Through these literacy efforts on the job they are supposed to keep track of each step of their team's production in order to repeatedly improve their team's process of work. In the movie, tensions emerge between the pride of the American workers who perform their individual jobs well and the Japanese expectations for working in teams.

The team approach assumes that when workers understand a whole system within the production or service, they will be better prepared to "add value" for the customers. For this reason, management in many companies today emphasizes teams of workers to continually evaluate

Activity: Perusing the Job Ads

How much can we see these trends in classified ads for jobs and career positions today? In groups, look at classified ads online. For more corporate positions, go to an online resume service, such as CareerBuilder.com, and look at several categories of jobs, particularly ones that call for various kinds of writing. For more factory-related jobs, you can look in online newspapers.

As you look and discuss, what does the information you find or don't find suggest about:

- transformations of the knowledge economy?
- the kinds of literacy you need to get the jobs?
- aspects of workplace literacy in the job that are explicitly stated and what is unsaid (what the worker would probably only learn when working in the job)?

and improve the set of processes assigned to them, whether they be keeping track of circuit board assembly or revising company documents to meet ever-changing standards and regulations in a global economy.

Since 1985 when *Gung Ho* was made, many companies have replaced the clipboards with electronic spreadsheets on computer terminals. This shift in literacy technologies within manufacturing and service has led many adult literacy experts in government and education to cry for new training in computer literacy skills. In contrast, ethnographic studies of literacy within these work settings have shown that success with these new literacy expectations has more to do with the social dynamics of the workplace than with retraining for a discrete set of skills, regardless of particular contexts or functions.

Implications for Work and Literacy in the Knowledge Economy

Competition Among Teams and Too Many Bosses

For corporations that adhere to this language of quality management, the identity of "customer" should not only apply to the end user of any product, but also to any others involved in another part of the

production in the same company. For example, in Geoffrey Cross' study of Montmache Industries (2000), a financial services company, the technical services department had to develop documents called service level agreements that would act as contracts with the 22 other branches of their company. The top management forced the company's technical services department to compete with tech service providers outside the corporation by creating a bid for the services with the company's branches or risk having their services outsourced to another company and their jobs eliminated. The technical services department needed to produce the service level agreements to show in writing what services would be provided for each unit inside the company. To develop these service level agreement contracts, and to keep their jobs, the technical services department had to view the employees of these other branches as their "customers" more than their colleagues, and they needed to compete for company resources with these other units of their company.

As this example from Cross' research suggests, through this language of customers in the global marketplace, executive management of companies often seek to foster internal competition among teams of workers in the same company responsible for different production processes in the name of "adding value" to all these customers' satisfaction. These kinds of tensions often complicate collaborative literacy practices in the workplace as we will later discuss. The movie *Office Space* makes fun of corporations that foster the competition of teams within the same company. A large banner hangs over the cubicles of the software firm Initech asking "Is This Good for the Company?," falsely implying everyone's value as a team player. But when Peter talks to outside consultants hired to reduce the work staff, he speaks the greater truth about work teams where many people can be your boss:

Peter: Here's something else. I have eight different bosses right now.

Bob Sydell: Excuse me? Eight?

Peter: Eight, Bob.

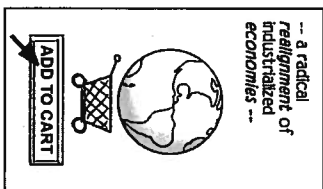
Peter: That means when I make a mistake . . . eight different people come to tell me about it. My only real motivation is not to be hassled. And fear of losing my job. But that only makes someone work just hard enough not to get fired.

*before business
object product production
called about product
"watermarking"*

Writing for Work in the Age of Lean and Flexible Companies

Changes in technology and information systems have further promoted an emphasis on the customer and the quality of the product. Technologies of the past two decades have helped smaller companies to create niche markets produced for specific consumer identities. These niche markets in turn work to produce these identities that require these particular niche products. As various technologies allow more goods to be customized for particular markets, making more consumer choices available, companies assume they must forever innovate their products and services to appeal to changing customer desires. Information technologies, such as the Internet, also compress space and time, allowing for the creation of many products and services anywhere on the planet where the needed resources are available and the labor is cheaper. This global competition for smaller and smaller niche markets has promoted the disintegration of company loyalties to workers in the wake of management practices such as outsourcing and off-shoring labor. In a 1996 *New York Times* poll, 75% of those polled felt companies were less loyal to workers than 10 years earlier, and 64% believed workers were now less loyal to companies.

Global competition and assumptions of customer desires have led companies to assume they must remain flexible and lean, ready to innovate quickly as deemed necessary. In *Office Space*, the threat of downsizing hangs over the employees of Initech as consultants come in to assess how much "value" each worker's job adds to the company's supposed quality. One of the workers at Initech complains in fear and anger that the consultants are called efficiency



Reinventing Comics
by Scott McCloud
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- Key Idea**
Flexible Capitalism
- working in temporary teams on companies' projects
 - expectations of continual innovation
 - no loyalties to worker or company

experts but that they're actually making everyone interview again for their own job.

In this view of the corporate workplace, top-management demands, many people will need to move in and out of teams, different projects, and sometimes jobs. Some management books on this brand of *flexible capitalism* suggest the analogy of a movie studio, where people assemble for a project, disband when no longer needed, and then seek work again with another project, possibly with a different company.

As this overview of work situations today indicates, these changes often require people to change their literacy practices and behaviors in many corporate and manufacturing settings. In terms of literacy practices, the assumptions of flexible capitalism require more amounts and kinds of writing than before. In general, every company and factory working under a process-centered model of management and global hyper-competition must use various forms of writing to constantly:

- identify customers, their needs, and the processes that deliver greatest customer satisfaction,
- design improvements to those processes of production (often through team management that then requires greater abilities in collaborative writing), and
- implement the recommended changes in these processes.

Workers' Literacy Identities in Flexible Capitalism

The promoters of flexible capitalism also expect workers take on new literacy behaviors that, as literacy scholars James Gee, Glynda Hull, and Colin Lankshar (1996) argue, also require a different social identity kit associated with these literacy behaviors. Although the degree of demand for these behaviors may vary between different corporate and manufacturing settings, upper management often requires workers to behave in the following rules.

- **Both entrepreneur and collaborator.** On the one hand, flexible capitalism requires corporate workers to assume they are independent employees who contract out their work to companies. As

new views about literacy

branches of companies seek to remain lean to meet changing demands in the marketplace, the worker cannot assume any loyalty from these companies beyond the end of each major project required by the company. Consequently, he must draw on his workplace literacy practices to repeatedly market his abilities as necessary. On the other hand, even as the worker must act as her own independent agent, employers expect her to deftly ease into the collaborations needed for each new project, often with new players. As many management books on flexible capitalism state, companies need workers who are "eager to stay, but ready to go," clearly a contradictory state of mind that calls for a complex balance of literacy behaviors.

- **An endlessly flexible team player.** Given the expectation of flexible team projects within lean companies with supposedly flattened hierarchies of management, business and education officials stress the need for workers in the 21st century to develop strong interpersonal skills and oral and written communications to serve them well in ever-changing collaborative contexts. Furthermore, some educators of adult literacy point out that workers' tolerance of other cultures has also become necessary in an increasingly ethnically diverse workforce in service and manufacturing jobs.

- **A perpetual learner, always eager for retraining.** According to the *New York Times* in 1996, a young American with at least 2 years of college could expect to change jobs at least 11 times and change their skill base at least 3 times in 40 years of labor. With the rapid continuous demand for greater efficiency, technological innovations, and higher quality for niche markets, many workers are forced by their employers or their job situation to continually learn new literacy skills for different social and technological contexts. For these reasons, educational policymakers, particularly those aligned with business interests, stress that elementary and secondary schools must teach students how to learn for themselves. They assume technological and social innovations will eventually make obsolete the *content* of current knowledge used in workplace settings. Deborah Brandt (2005) notes this expectation

flexibility

of continual retraining in her recent study of the changes for professionals who often write for their jobs in the knowledge economy. All the workers she interviewed who were not self-employed “attended work-related training ranging from several weeks at special institutes to day-long in-house classes. In addition, several pursued self-education via career-related reading during leisure hours” (p. 186).

So What Happens to Workers’ Knowledge in a Knowledge Economy?

Although *The Secret of My Success* depicted the older hierarchical structure of American corporations, the movie also satirized the problems of knowledge distribution within the emergence of a more global economy. In the first scene Brantley loses his first corporate job on the first day of work due to a “hostile takeover” by a larger company. When Brantley goes to another company’s personnel department, he’s told he doesn’t have experience for a job in that company. When he asks how he can get the experience if he doesn’t have a job, the personnel guy says:

Personnel: If we gave you a job to just give you experience, you would take that experience to get a better job. And that experience would benefit someone else.

Brantley: Yeah, but I was trained in college to handle a job like this, so in a sense I already have experience.

Personnel: What you’ve got is college experience, not the practical hardwired business experience we’re looking for. If you joined our training program out of high school, you would be qualified for this job now.

Brantley: So then why did I go to college?

Personnel: You had fun, didn’t you?

This paradox of job experience suggests the corporations’ fear that their workers’ knowledge cannot be wholly contained as the property of the company. When companies and manufacturers emphasize the quality of goods and services to highly targeted markets, the ideas of the employees become the necessary commodity to meet global competition. And, as Deborah Brandt (2005) puts it, “The human skills of literacy make the knowledge economy viable. Writers put knowledge in tangible, and thereby transactional, form” (p. 167). Once workers write down their

ideas in the various forms of business writing (such as reports, proposals, and process manuals), the writing itself can become a marketable commodity. As management recognizes the employees’ writing as a commodity with economic value for trade and profit, they will likely seek to contain the writing and the employees’ ideas within the company. Similarly, since writing as a commodity can promote profit, outside organizations, such as government agencies and corporate trade associations, may seek to regulate forms of writing to prevent unethical behaviors by companies. For these reasons, the knowledge economy represents a major shift from an economy of material production (where the product you produced is what counted) to information processing (where the knowledge for how to continually improve the quality of the process and product will keep the company competitive).

- Key Idea**
Managing Workers’ Knowledge in the Knowledge Economy
1. focus shifts from material production to information processing
 2. ideas of employees become the necessary commodity for profit
 3. workers’ literacy practices become crucial human capital for corporations
 4. corporations become vulnerable to leaky property of workers’ literacy

Workers’ Literacy Gains and Companies’ Knowledge Drains

In this way, workers’ literacy practices become the human capital of the 21st century that fuels greater economic success more than physical labor or the money of the stockholders. But when companies rely on people’s continually expanding literacy practices as necessary human capital, they also become vulnerable to the “leaky property” of workers’ knowledge-making. Brandt writes, “When the assets are human, companies can’t own them, but they can grow them and try to control them” (2005, p. 188), as we saw in this moment from *The Secret of My Success*.

This vulnerability of knowledge drain from companies further explains the importance of team processes and the strategies of “just-in-time” learning in today’s workplace literacy. Management experts talk about guiding “knowledge flows” within companies and organizations. As Brandt points out: “The aim [of these managers] is to embed knowledge

AS IDEAS ON PAPER
 MANAGING A
 COMPANY

What is valuable

*Tracing knowledge
in the place
of work*

deeply within the organizational routines and structures, so that it does not belong to any one person" (2005, p. 189) who might be able to take that knowledge with him.

The corporate model of team organization serves these contradictory goals

of distributed knowledge where each worker's contributions help create a smart system, but each worker is less likely to benefit individually from the knowledge created by the whole team. From the management's view, they want to organize the corporate workplace to make communication and learning of new systems easier among co-workers, yet more difficult to identify for competitors.

The corporate need to contain and channel "knowledge flows," so they most benefit the company, also explains many managers' great interest in the strategy of just-in-time learning. On the one hand, businesses assume that the evolving changes in customer markets require a flexibility to learn new skills as the needs emerge for a given work project. For instance, a team may need to learn how to manage new software, run new machinery, or write different kinds of documents, challenges that will likely require building upon their previous set of literacy practices and behaviors to manage this new learning. On the other hand, the corporate strategy of just-in-time learning can also serve the company by better preserving competencies within the business rather than with individual workers who may leave the company or be laid off.

Definition
Distributed Knowledge
Organization of worker teams in which no single worker manages the full knowledge of a corporate system or structure.

Power and Social Dynamics of Literacy Teamwork in the Knowledge Economy

So what are the challenges that workers face when collaborating in teams within the new work order of flexible capitalism? In this section, we will discuss what factors can complicate and motivate collaborative literacy work in corporations, highly regulated industries, and in manufacturing. Having identified these factors, you will be better prepared to look for them, or patterns of social dynamics related to these factors, in any workplace settings you might research or encounter in your own future work situations.

Challenges of Collaborative Literacy in Corporations

In the case of corporate settings, Geoffrey Cross's ethnography of Montmache Technical Services shows how a company's expectations of total quality management can demand collaboration across many branches of a business. As mentioned earlier, the technical services branch of Montmache Financial Services had to quickly learn how to be more responsive to the different information technology needs of 22 other units of the company to prevent the outsourcing of their jobs. To develop customer-designed service level agreement contracts with the other branches of Montmache, the technical services department needed to collaborate on writing these documents with branch representatives from all over the company. Cross identified several major factors that challenged this large-scale collaborative project. We will discuss three of these factors that would likely emerge in most large corporate work situations.

Key Idea
Three Factors Involved in Large-Scale Collaborative Writing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • choosing consensus vs. hierarchical model of collaboration • balancing oral culture with written communications • collaborating within an environment of constant change

■ Choosing between a consensus vs. a hierarchical model of collaboration

Drawing from earlier studies of collaborative work, Cross asserts that the goal of large-group collaboration is to develop a "collective mind." Weick and Roberts (1993) identify a collective mind as when members of a large group (or set of groups) maintain "heedful interrelation of group members" (Cross, 2000, p. 9). The members of the group(s) work toward this heedful interrelation by carefully listening to the concerns of the other members and the groups involved as they relate to the goals of the project. To achieve these goals, a group can employ a consensus model of collaboration, where all, or most, members involved take part in decision making, the planning of tasks, and the writing of documents. Or group leaders can choose a more hierarchical model of collaboration, where leaders make the decisions and assign communication and writing tasks to smaller groups.