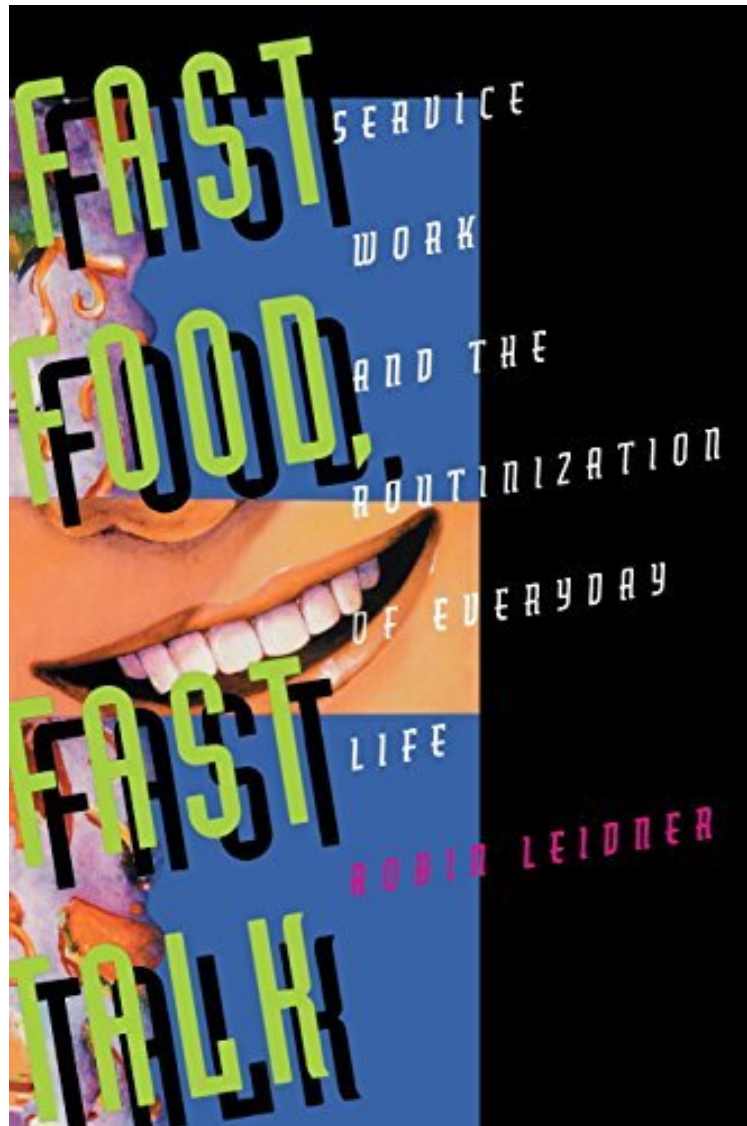


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## Fast Food, Fast Talk: Service Work and the Routinization of Everyday Life

*Robin Leidner*

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**Robin Leidner : Fast Food, Fast Talk: Service Work and the Routinization of Everyday Life** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Fast Food, Fast Talk: Service Work and the Routinization of Everyday Life:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. PhenomenalBy CarsonI wish I had read this great work when a graduate student in my sociology program. This is a very insightful and scholarly work that is directly applicable even today to those in many professions who have been experiencing the negative effects of depersonalization, alienation,

deskilling, routinization and other sordid effects of various occupational ghettos (such as libraries) that were never that great to start with but have since rapidly declined in their so-called "professionalism" that at least required some technical skills and knowledge to a little degree. This is a must-read for public librarians especially; those in the stressful food industry; and those studying the illustrious social sciences. Most highly recommended. Hope to see more books for Dr. Leidner. Should be required reading in all library science graduate programs.

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Three Stars  
By mylight5  
Nice shirt...My daughter loves it!  
6 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Engaging book, debateable premise  
By Garry Lafollette  
When all is said and done, American consumers are more alike than they are different. This truth of human psychology provides the bedrock of our mass production economy; it is possible to create core products that millions of people will buy, and it is possible to design methods of presentation and marketing that millions of people will respond to. Consistency beats creativity. That said, individuals, even those who aren't considered wildly creative or in any way eccentric still need to shave off 5 - 10% of their personalities to find their fit in cultures devoted to providing a consistent product or approach to business.

Dr. Leidner's study of how this morphing of individual to group collective focuses on two job classes at diverse ends of the American economic experience. On the one side is McDonalds, whose counter and burger flipping positions, even if in many instances filled by students on their way to something far different, have also become a shorthand for employment of last resort among those with few skills, options, and long term prospects. On the other end of the study is Combined Insurance Company of America (CICA), a subsidiary of Aon Corp. CICA is a sales driven company, and sales - despite the field's high washout rate - remains for those who do it well the highest paying profession in America.

Early on Dr. Leidner suggests that there is irony in the fact that these companies, which rely on structure and standardization to a degree uncommon in their respective fields, were formed by highly dynamic individualists, Ray Krock and W. Clement Stone respectively, who challenged convention and relied on personal instinct in building their empires. It makes for a nice sentence or two, but most people who build empires, be they Krock and Stone, or Henry Ford, Andrew Carnegie, James Hill, Michael Dell, Sam Walton, etc use a different approach to building than will subsequently be needed to maintain and expand those companies. Even a company as wildly creative as Apple Computer needs to instill a degree of structure within the organization if only so it doesn't fall prey to entropy.

Still, organizational structure isn't the theme of the book, instead it is what happens to people whose jobs involve working directly with customers, human interactions, that realm of life where individual personality is most apt to express itself, but who are told to conduct those exchanges with the same routine and scripting of a working standing at a machine and mass producing parts on an assembly line. Because McDonalds is a recognizable American icon most of the attention given this book - including the other review on this site - focuses on the chapters dealing with the fast food giant. I found the chapters about Combined Insurance Company far more interesting. I work in sales and during my second year in the field I joined (and have since left) CICA in Virginia during the time that Leidner was doing her research and observations in the company's midwestern operations.

Leidner focused on the company's Life division, even as she stated that the Accident Indemnity division which I sold in, practiced the greatest reliance on standardized presentations and scripting in general. In her assessment the company's philosophy of reliance on a tightly structured sales system came at the expense of individualism and forced sales reps to sublimate elements of their own personalities and as such had to struggle with feelings of inauthenticity and a loss of self.

To a degree her assessment makes sense, and as CICA gave her full access to the company's sales school, as well as interviews and field time with new agents and managers, her studies did reflect what her subjects cited as their actual experiences. That said - and despite CICA giving her more cooperation and acceptance than some at McDonalds gave her - I feel that she didn't do as complete a job of putting CICA in its proper place within the evolution of sales methods over the past 100+ years.

Dr. Leidner seemed at times to subscribe to the myth of the 'natural born salesperson'. The hired gun who shot from the hip, said whatever came to mind, and sold circles around everyone else b/c of innate abilities that couldn't be studied, quantified, or taught. This misconception has long bitten at the heels of anyone who dared argue that sales can be taught. In the 1890's when John Henry Peterson organized the first sales schools for NCR reps, and wrote the first standardized sales manual, which he demanded his reps follow - at the risk of being fired even if they met quota while using other methods there has been a debate over whether selling is a learnable skill or an artform that one either has or hasn't. People in the latter camp react to any approach to standardize the field in the same way a literary writer reacts to romance and mystery novelist who churn out and sell formulaic fiction by the boatload.

It has been my observation over 20 plus yrs that people who enter sales with the latter view often washout and return to other fields when they find that doing it by the seat of their pants doesn't work. CICA's training wasn't so much about denying individual initiative, but about giving the individual agent tools that worked (this after all is the field where Elmer Wheeler, the man remembered for coining the phrase 'sell the sizzle, not the steak' found that a sales rep could increase his sales 500% just by omitting two words in his closing sentence).

Reading Dr. Leidner's account of new hires trying to deal with CICA's methods in 1987 I was reminded of some of my long forgotten impressions from sales school. At the time I watched my classmates, most of whom were new to sales and with little previous knowledge of the history of the field, its innovators, and groundbreakers, or of the principles of human behavior that drove the methods, react defensively and with uncertainty to what they were being taught. My impression at the time was that CICA could have

generated greater acceptance of its methods if some time had been given to validating the underlying principles - which that minority of us with prior sales backgrounds knew to be true. Dr. Leidner's interviews suggested that some of the new agents she spent time with struggled with the same thing. As such, what she terms a struggle to keep subverting the self, and losing one's individuality to scripted methods, may in fact have been an individual lost in a tool chest or weighed down by a tool belt such that they somehow failed to see themselves for what they really were, craftsmen provided with world class tools, whose success or failure would depend on how they as individuals used those tools.

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.

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. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. About the Author Robin Leidner is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania.