

Andrew Ross looks for justice in the New Economy workplace.

When the trappings of the dotcom workplace circa 2000—foosball tables, beanbag chairs, employee-produced hallway art—began filling workplaces, they had a serious purpose: to create an atmosphere that employees would find so fulfilling that they'd never want to go home. "When work becomes sufficiently humane," says Andrew Ross, "we are likely to do far too much of it."

Beginning in fall 2000, Ross, director of New York University's American Studies program, devoted more than a year to studying the "new office utopia." He was assigned a cubicle at two Silicon Alley new-economy companies—technology-services firm Razorfish and urban-music dotcom 360hiphop.com—and spent days observing and interviewing. He saw the companies through the tech boom and bust, and his new book, *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs* (Basic), is a warts-and-all documentary with lessons for business managers, thinkers, and workers.

Ross, 46, spoke with *ATB* managing editor Matthew Budman from his home in New York.



What characterizes the no-collar mentality?

In these workplaces, the encroachment of work time on leisure time was actively encouraged. You ended up with a situation about which the employees were very ambivalent—they recognized that the rest of their lives disappeared, as demarcated from their work. On the other hand, they found their work immensely pleasurable, up to a point. There is a point where people want to draw a line; they realize that they're working far too much. But in the economy in general, there aren't too many stop signs out there. All of the lights are green.

At one point in *No-Collar*, you note that a group of Razorfish people "had so entirely taken

self-management to heart that they were only just beginning to notice that the company had a senior management group." Did the people you talked with feel that they had a real share of power?

Absolutely. Number one on the list of things that employees said they liked was that they had a share of power, which they understood was fairly unique in corporate history. In some sense, that was circumstantial: The protean organization of the companies meant that managers *couldn't* really draw upon their own experience in any efficient way, and the people who had all the knowledge of the technology were the rank-and-file employees. In addition, there was an ethos—which was a major part of the company

culture—that they really did expect employees to believe that they had not only autonomy but a large degree of power-sharing. Not all of that was related to their part ownership of the company, in the form of stock options—it had to do with free speech and decision-making on their own projects. It was part of the culture.

Did fostering that kind of environment create confusion in times of crisis, when the companies needed leadership?

When layoffs and office closures came, employees became cynical about management; they came to recognize—very abruptly—that they didn't really have executive power. There was one interesting situation at Razorfish: People were to be laid

off, and a manager proposed that the company do this in a truly democratic fashion—get together and try to figure out who needed the job more than others. But of course, it wasn't done that way.

How much did it mean to the workers that their employer did things differently, that they felt like outsiders from Corporate America?

A lot. It was an essential part of the work identity. But since they were interfacing with large corporate clients all the time, what they were doing was colored by the belief that they were changing Corporate America itself—even though they were outsiders.

The work environment seems integral to that feeling of authenticity: You describe employees

going on site visits to clients' offices and lamenting their "artificial culture," as opposed to their own company's "authentic culture."

At places like Razorfish and 360hiphop, there's a high premium placed on this; it's part of the self-image of employees. Employees at other companies are seen as second-class citizens by comparison. But also within Razorfish and 360hiphop, there was a good deal of debate about the culture: They would pay lip service to the company culture as it

came down the pike was very fresh. This was a generation in the workforce whose passion for social change was being channeled into an obsession with corporate change, and a lot of the rhetoric of revolution got attached to that, from Tom Peters all the way down.

Do you think the former dotcomers will carry that revolution with them in their careers?

Based on my conversations and interviews with employees who were either still in these companies or who had been

although not necessarily as visible as one might expect.

So it's not just about foosball tables in the office.

I think these are just symbols and icons and markers. Normalization is always a lot less visible.

Does it work? Should managers across Corporate America be looking to open up their workplaces to allow more freedom and humanity?

Corporate America has gotten more and more used to the idea that greater pro-

benefits, protection for all, and some measure of democratic control over the enterprise. A workplace can be humane because it feels good to work there, without necessarily being just. A traditional corporate workplace from the postwar period was more likely to be just without being too humane. After the 1970s, when flexibility was introduced, the workplace became less just, and this loss was compensated for by introducing feel-good programs.

There's an inexorable march toward the informalization of everything, including the workplace.

was advocated and promoted by management, but what they prized most was what they created among themselves. Razorfish was a company that had a counterculture in relation to Corporate America, but it also had a counterculture within itself.

In describing these workplaces, you use words like *autonomy*, *collegiality*, and *independence*—and then go further and invoke concepts like *freedom* and *humanity*. Did employees think about their work and lives in these kinds of grand terms?

In interviews, they certainly did. These were educated employees, many of them with arts backgrounds, and they were very conscious of how several currents were flowing through their workplace. On the one hand, they were aware of management strategies that were clearly designed to boost their productivity and efficiency, and on the other hand, they wanted to take advantage of the autonomy they were being given. What they didn't have was a lot of experience in working in corporate organizations, so everything that

laid off or gone off to find other jobs, this was a primary premise for themselves: They had been part of a new economy; they often talked about it as a virus or a revolution, some kind of gene that they would carry with them and look for in other workplaces.

You write that "the most important influence of the New Economy will be on employees' expectations of work conditions."

Those employees are changing the horizon of expectations across Corporate America. Indeed, there's an inexorable march toward informalization of everything, including the workplace. New Economy companies just happened to be a catalyst, a particularly fast-moving vehicle for that. But that informalization has been proceeding apace, not just in terms of organization of workplaces but also the organization of work itself, when we see increasingly casual work contracts and a rise in levels of contingent work and so forth. I expect the legacy of these workplaces to be fairly profound

ductivity can be generated from humane concessions while, at the same time, eviscerating the security that American employees have wanted to expect from their workplaces. And there's less and less of a sense of any guidelines about what you need to survive in the economy these days. It's not that injustice is anything new in our economic history, but people used to have some idea of what the rules were for getting on, what you needed to know. That's no longer the case; it's a lot more ambiguous these days. And ultimately, that's not very humane. So I would hope that corporate managers will be able to think about the attractions and the hidden costs of the humane workplace—and also how they could make things a little more just for their employees.

What's the difference between a humane workplace and a just workplace?

A just workplace would be one that came with guarantees of job security and

Are younger employees increasingly willing to sacrifice job security for work that's fun and rewarding—for feel-good programs?

If they had to choose between a humane workplace or a just workplace, my feeling is that a lot of employees would choose the just workplace. Ideally, we should have both, but the tendency in Corporate America is, as I said, to grant more and more humane concessions while taking away a lot of the security and the other things that employees associate with a just workplace. For each of the very attractive features that I saw at Razorfish and 360hiphop, there were hidden costs.

I'm not against humane workplaces—I think there are many features of those workplaces that employees deserve as a matter of right. It's more difficult for employees to have access to a humane workplace than for citizens to have the right to vote in most parts of the world. But my hope is that managers start to think about the just workplace as much as the humane workplace. ♦