

Some Lessons From The Assembly Line.

Authors: Braaksma, Andrew

Source: Newsweek. 9/12/2005, Vol. 146 Issue 11, p17-17. 1p. 1 Color Photograph.

Document Type: Article

Subjects: COLLEGE students
INDUSTRIAL workers
APPRENTICES
OCCUPATIONS
COLLEGE environment

Geographic Terms: UNITED States

Abstract: Describes the author's experiences with summer jobs and the differences with college life. Comparison of the difficulties of working 12-hour days in a factory with leisurely college life; Lessons learned about the value of education; How the author applies his factory work lessons to his college studies; Why the author chooses to work in a factory and live at home during the summer; Discussion of the value of his work experiences.

Full Text Word Count: 890

ISSN: 0028-9604

Accession Number: 18139488

Some Lessons From The Assembly Line

Listen

American Accent ▼

Section:

My Turn

Sweating away my summers as a factory worker makes me more than happy to hit the books.

Last June, as I stood behind the bright orange guard door of the machine, listening to the crackling hiss of the automatic welders, I thought about how different my life had been just a few weeks earlier. Then, I was writing an essay about French literature to complete my last exam of the spring semester at college. Now I stood in an automotive plant in southwest Michigan, making subassemblies for a car manufacturer.

I have worked as a temp in the factories surrounding my hometown every summer since I graduated from high school, but making the transition between school and full-time blue-collar work during the break never gets any easier. For a student like me who considers any class before noon to be uncivilized, getting to a factory by 6 o'clock each morning, where rows of hulking, spark-showering machines have replaced the lush campus and cavernous lecture halls of college life, is torture. There my time is spent stamping, cutting, welding, moving or assembling parts, the rigid work schedules and quotas of the plant making days spent studying and watching "SportsCenter" seem like a million years ago.

I chose to do this work, rather than bus tables or fold sweatshirts at the Gap, for the overtime pay and because living at home is infinitely cheaper than living on campus for the summer. My friends who take easier, part-time jobs never seem to understand why I'm so relieved to be back at school in the fall or that my summer vacation has been anything but a vacation.

There are few things as cocksure as a college student who has never been out in the real world, and people my age always seem to overestimate the value of their time and knowledge. After a particularly exhausting string of 12-hour days at a plastics factory, I remember being shocked at how small my check seemed. I couldn't believe how little I was taking home after all the hours I spent on the sweltering production floor. And all the classes in the world could not have prepared me for my battles with the machine I ran in the plant, which would jam whenever I absent-mindedly put in a part backward or upside down.

As frustrating as the work can be, the most stressful thing about blue-collar life is knowing your job could disappear overnight. Issues like downsizing and overseas relocation had always seemed distant to me until my co-workers at one factory told me that the unit I was working in would be shut down within six months and moved to Mexico, where people would work for 60 cents an hour.

Factory life has shown me what my future might have been like had I never gone to college in the first place. For me, and probably many of my fellow students, higher education always seemed like a foregone conclusion: I never questioned if I was going to college, just where. No other options ever occurred to me.

After working 12-hour shifts in a factory, the other options have become brutally clear. When I'm back at the university, skipping classes and turning in lazy re-writes seems like a cop-out after seeing what I would be doing without school. All the advice and public-service announcements about the value of an education that used to sound trite now ring true.

These lessons I am learning, however valuable, are always tinged with a sense of guilt. Many people pass their lives in the places I briefly work, spending 30 years where I spend only two months at a time. When fall comes around, I get to go back to a sunny and beautiful campus, while work in the factories continues. At times I feel almost voyeuristic, like a tourist dropping in where other people make their

livelihoods. My lessons about education are learned at the expense of those who weren't fortunate enough to receive one. "This job pays well, but it's hell on the body," said one co-worker. "Study hard and keep reading," she added, nodding at the copy of Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" I had wedged into the space next to my machine so I could read discreetly when the line went down.

My experiences will stay with me long after I head back to school and spend my wages on books and beer. The things that factory work has taught me--how lucky I am to get an education, how to work hard, how easy it is to lose that work once you have it--are by no means earth-shattering. Everyone has to come to grips with them at some point. How and when I learned these lessons, however, has inspired me to make the most of my college years before I enter the real world for good. Until then, the summer months I spend in the factories will be long, tiring and every bit as educational as a French-lit class.

PHOTO (COLOR): Is that all? After an exhausting string of 12-hour days, I remember being shocked at how small my check seemed

~~~~~

By Andrew Braaksma

Braaksma, a junior at the University of Michigan, wrote the winning essay in our "Back To School" contest.

---

Copyright of Newsweek is the property of Newsweek LLC and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

"Some Lessons From the Assembly Line" by Andrew Braaksma (2005)

Andrew Braaksma story is amazing and very believable and the reason I have to arrive at decision because it describes my life as I myself-work a job like this to put my self through college.

The three key points for me 1. After working 12-hour shifts in a factory, the other options have become brutally clear. When I'm back at the university, skipping classes and turning in lazy re-write seems like a cop-out after seeing what I would be doing without school. All the advice and public-service announcements about the value of an education that used to sound trite now ring true. 2. As frustrating as the work can be, the most stressful thing about blue-collar life is knowing your job could disappear overnight. Issues like downsizing and overseas relocation had always seemed distant to me until my co-workers at one factory told me that the unit I was working in would be shut down within six months and moved to Mexico, where people would work for 60 cents an hour. 3. Is that all? After an exhausting string of 12-hour days, I remember being shocked at how small my check seemed

Factory works, blue collar works people work in public service college working there way through school.