

preface to the revised edition

This book is a report of an ethnographic voyage—an effort to understand a distant and esoteric way of life through extended immersion and close observation. Unlike many voyages of this sort, however, it did not take me to the peripheries of empires or the edges of civilization, nor even to the marginal “others” closer to home, but in the opposite direction—to the metropolis, to the center, to the heart of the American empire, and to one of the sources of its power: the engineering division of a large, successful, and well-known high-tech corporation.

In retrospect, there were good reasons to undertake this journey, and there are, I hope, good reasons to read a book about it. The significance of the ways high-tech managers and workers conduct their lives reaches far beyond the limited, highly specialized arenas in which they work. The world of high-tech has come to be seen, in popular culture no less than among academic observers, as something of a microcosm in which the complex, changing cultural realities of work in general—and particularly professional and knowledge-based work—are reflected. In this view, found in the densely linked and pervasive discourses on “the postindustrial revolution,” “globalization,” “the new economy,” and “the knowledge society,” the high-tech sector and its workers are one of the quintessential manifestations of, driving forces behind, and models for the dramatic changes that have transformed the world during the second half of the twentieth century. The high-tech industry’s role in this revolution, it is argued, is not limited only to the inexorable stream of innovative computing and communications products that have provided its necessary material conditions; high-tech is also the source of widely diffused ideas that shape our worldview and the way we live: beliefs about what work means, templates for how to best organize and manage it, images of who we are—or might become—when we do so.

It was these ideas—their source, their everyday expression, their impact—that I set out to explore. As Chapter 1 shows, a massive outpouring of promises were made in the name of the high-tech way of life—of a new era, new work organizations, a new man and woman; of huge profits, futuristic innovation, humane working environments, and happy, productive workers. In the face of this relentless rhetoric, I felt that a more sober, balanced, and skeptical view was called for: what, I wanted to know, was really going on

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behind the scenes of the organization of the future? How were these ideas formulated and diffused? What versions of reality did they promote? What did they—and didn't they—mean to the people whose work experience they were designed to shape? How did they come to life and how and to what extent did they become influential? And, most crucially, what were their implications for the people whose livelihood, and lives, were at stake?

This book, researched in 1986 and originally published in 1992, is an attempt to answer these questions. Ethnography, as I argue in the appendix to the book, with its close attention to the mundane details of everyday life, its suspicion of the clichés and platitudes of managerial and academic authority, and its distaste for sweeping statements and ungrounded generalizations, is particularly well suited to do this. And yet, a reader may ask, how relevant can an ethnography be, no matter how accurate and insightful the reader finds it, almost two decades after the events it describes took place?

This is a legitimate question. It is the fate of ethnography—and perhaps its mission—to become, with time, a cultural history of ways of life that have passed from the world. This in itself, it might be argued, is an intrinsically worthwhile project—who would deny we have much to learn from the past? But, at its best, ethnography is more ambitious: it also aspires to expose, touch and formulate truths about the human condition, truths that are valid and meaningful beyond specific times and places, that speak to our present and future.

In an ethnography of a high-tech company, this tension between past and present, between the local and the universal, is, by its very nature, particularly acute. High-tech is a world often portrayed by its residents as a place where the only constant is change, and every effort to describe it is already outdated—like yesterday's new high-tech gadget—by the time it is published. In such a view, the only relevant time frame is the immediate present; the future is the next quarter; and two decades is an eternity.

One might question the validity of such hyperbole. Yet one also must acknowledge that much indeed has changed in the world of high-tech since I undertook my voyage. This is apparent already in the description of the routine morning commute to work in the opening pages of this book: there were far more Toyotas on the road then, and the ubiquitous mobile phones that link commuters to their work and to each other today were still unheard of, or from. Further into the book, the reader will encounter more evidence of change: Japan was still perceived by Americans as an industrial power to

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be feared and emulated; smoking was more popular and more legitimate; electronic mail was still in its infancy; and, of course, there was no Internet. Managerial practices, too, have changed. The alert reader will find only marginal reference to current managerial staples such as contract workers and outsourced work. Perhaps more disconcertingly, the company itself, at the time a celebrated industry leader both in its technology and its “corporate culture,” no longer exists.

And if this were not enough, “corporate culture”—the central concern of this book—is also not what it used to be. Over the last two decades the intense, at times faddish, academic concern with culture has subsided, and popular managerial writers have also turned their fashion-conscious efforts elsewhere. The language of culture has assumed a more realistic place in organizational and management theory as one more attempt—important but certainly not dominant—to understand, intervene in, and shape the complex world of work and organization.

This book, then, tells the story of a place and time that grows more remote from its readers’ reality with each passing day. And yet, my subsequent encounters with the worlds of high-tech—in the United States and Europe, and in Israel, where I live—have led me to believe that beyond obvious differences in style and rhetoric, and even more fundamental changes in technology and managerial practices, there is still much that has remained unchanged: culture and culture management—under whatever name—are still very much alive today, in theory and even more so in practice, as are the stresses, tensions and dilemmas of the high-tech life that they produce. And readers’ responses over the years—to the original text and to its translated versions (the book has been translated into Hebrew, Italian, and Japanese; see Kunda [2000a], Kunda [2000b], and Kunda [2005])—also have indicated that this book touches, often in unforeseen ways, on issues and concerns that are still relevant and very much part of everyday life. The managerial effort to shape communities of work and the experience of workers, and the far reaching, often unanticipated, and not always welcome consequences of these efforts, are of acute interest, I learnt, not only in cutting edge R&D divisions of American high-tech corporations, but elsewhere as well: other organizations, other industries, other types of work and workers, other parts of the world.

Here, then, is the second edition. I have decided to leave the text unchanged and allow it to speak for itself. To what extent it is alive, relevant, and thought