



# The Organization Man

*William H. Whyte*

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## **The Organization Man** William H. Whyte

Who's the organization man? In America he's the prosperous, white-collar worker who lives under the protection of a big organization such as the civil service or a business corporation, & who has a kind of job in which more & more Americans are finding a promise of security & high standards of living. This book is a study of him-how he's trained in college & at work, how he's selected & tested for employment & advancement, how he lives in the family, how he worships, what he thinks, & what he hopes to get out of life. All this is of direct interest to us, for what is happening in America is happening here. We are most of us, to some degree, organization men, & specialization is already ousting the liberal arts from pride of place in our educational system. Is ours to be a society governed by the mediocrity of business method? We will do well to take warning from *The Organization Man*.

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## The Organization Man Details

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Author : William H. Whyte

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## From Reader Review The Organization Man for online ebook

### Scuppers says

Today, students graduating go work for organizations. Whether you're an engineer, a teacher, or even a doctor, you usually join some kind of company.

This book is about that phenomenon, and how in joining these organizations, people place part of the control of their lives into the hands of others.

Written back when large multi-national corporations were rare. It's interesting even to read about any alternative to joining large corporations.

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### Nicholas says

I read this because of the RibbonFarm post about the office. Which is must read. That shit is awesome. Search for the Gervais Principle.

I love how at the end of the book is an appendix about how to beat personality tests.

#### Quotes:

"The new cookie-cutter suburbs were becoming, as he put it, "the dormitory of the next managerial class.""

"Man exists as a unit of society. Of himself, he is isolated, meaningless; only as he collaborates with others does he become worthwhile, for by sublimating himself in the group, he helps produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts."

"This is the new suburbia, the packaged villages that have become the dormitory of the new generation of organization men."

"This book is not a plea for nonconformity. Such pleas have an occasional therapeutic value, but as an abstraction, nonconformity is an empty goal, and rebellion against prevailing opinion merely because it is prevailing should no more be praised than acquiescence to it. Indeed, it is often a mask for cowardice, and few are more pathetic than those who flaunt outer differences to expiate their inner surrender."

"And how important, really, are these uniformities to the central issue of individualism? We must not let the outward forms deceive us. If individualism involve following one's destiny as one's own conscience directs, it must for most of us be a realizable destiny, and a sensible awareness of the rules of the game can be a condition of individualism as well as a constraint upon it. The man who drives a Buick Special and lives in a ranch-type house just like hundreds of other ranch-type houses can assert himself as effectively and courageously against his particular society as the bohemian against his particular society. He usually does not, it is true, but if he does, the surface uniformities can serve quite well as protective coloration. The organization people who are best able to control their environment rather than be controlled by it are well aware that they are not too easily distinguishable from the others in the outward obeisances paid to the good opinion of others. And that is one of the reasons they do control. They disarm society."

"Every decision he faces on the problem of the individual versus authority is something of a dilemma. It is not a case of whether he should fight against black tyranny or blaze a new trail against patent stupidity. That would be easy - intellectually, at least. The real issue is far more subtle. For it is not the evils of organization life that puzzle him, but its very beneficence. He is imprisoned in brotherhood. Because his area of maneuver seems so small and because the trapping so mundane, his fight lacks the heroic cast, but it is for all this as tough a fight as ever his predecessors had to fight."

"There is always plenty of room at the top."

"Not for lack of ambition do the younger men dream so moderately; what they lack is the illusion that they will carry on in the great entrepreneurial spirit."

"Man might not be perfectible after all, but there was another dream and now at last it seemed practical: the perfectibility of society."

"If the techniques are faulty, and this they admit, that is a matter of unfinished detail and insufficient funds, not principles, and no one should criticize until he offers a counter-utopia himself."

"Many a contemporary prescription for utopia can be summarized if you cross out the name of one group and substitute another in the following charge: 'Society has broken down; the family, the church, the community, the schools, business - each has failed to give the individual the belongingness he needs and this it is now the task of ----- group to do the job.'"

"The hunch that wasn't followed up. The controversial point that didn't get debated. The idea that was suppressed. Were these acts of group co-operation or individual surrender? We are taking away from the individual the ability even to ask the question?"

"In further institutionalizing the great power of the majority, we are making the individual come to distrust himself. We are giving him a rationalization for the unconscious urging to find an authority that would resolve the burdens of free choice. We are tempting him to reinterpret the group pressures as a release, authority as freedom, and that this quest assumes a moral guise makes it only the more poignant."

"Small business is small because of nepotism and the roll-top desk outlook, the argument goes; big business, by contrast, has borrowed the tools of science and made them pay off. It has its great laboratories, its market-research departments, and the time and patience to use them."

"He didn't learn what business can't teach him because he was too busy learning what business could teach him, and teach him better." [on bschool]

"To be aware of one's conformity is to be aware that there is some antithesis between oneself and the demands of the system. This does not itself stimulate independence, but it is a necessary condition of it; and contrasted with the wishful vision of total harmony not being touted, it demonstrates a pretty tough-minded grasp of reality."

"To control one's destiny and not be controlled by it; to know which way the path will fork and to make the turning oneself; to have some index of achievement that no one can dispute - concrete and tangible for all to see, not dependent on the attitudes of others. It is an independence he will never have in full measure but he must forever seek it."

"I have argued that the dominant ideological drift in organization life is toward (1) idolatry of the system and (2) the misuse of science to achieve this...[Personality tests] are not science; only the illusion of it."

"The conclusions drawn from these aptitude and intelligence scores are, furthermore, limited to the relatively modest prediction of a man's capability of doing the same sort of thing he is asked to do on the tests."

"The mathematics is impeccable - and thus entrapping. Because "percentiles" and "coefficients" and "standard deviations" are of themselves neutral, the sheer methodology of using them can convince people that they are translating uncertainty into certainty, the subjective into the objective, and eliminating utterly the bugbear of value judgement. But the mathematics does not eliminate values; it only obscures them."

"No matter how many variables you add you cannot make a constant of them."

"The accuracy of the internal mathematics is confused with the accuracy of the premises."

"When tests are used as selection devices, they are not a neutral tool; they become a large factor in the very equation they purport to measure."

"If you want to get a high score you will do well to observe these two rules: (1) When asked for word associations or comments about the world, give the most conventional, run-of-the-mill, pedestrian answer possible. (2) When in doubt about the most beneficial answer to any question, repeat to yourself: I loved my father and my mother, but my father a little bit more. I like things pretty much the way they are. I never worry much about anything. I don't care for books or music much. I love my wife and children. I don't let them get in the way of company work."

"The administrator cannot understand that a man can dislike a company - perhaps even leave in disgust after several years - and still have made a net contribution to the company cash register infinitely greater than all of his better-adjusted colleagues put together."

"In any field, we all want to reassure ourselves that things are the way they are because that's the way they should be, and science is no exception."

"God likes regular people - people who play baseball, like movie nuns. He smiles on society, and his message is a relaxing one. He does not scold you; he does not demand of you. He is a gregarious God and he can be found in the smiling happy people of the society about you." [Love means never making demands.]

"Democracy under private capitalism has shaved off the edges of these plateaus, and the whole population moves, according to the ethos of our culture, endlessly and breathlessly up one long, unbroken sandy slope of acquisition...from every point on the unbroken incline one can look ahead and see others with more than one has oneself."

"In a continually expanding economy, they reason, future prosperity will retroactively pay for today, and there is, accordingly, no good sense to self-denial."

"But where is the boat going? No one seems to have the faintest idea; nor, for that matter, do they see much point in even raising the question. Once people liked to think, at least, that they were in control of their destinies, but few of the younger organization people cherish such notions. Most see themselves as objects more acted upon than acting - and their future, therefore, determined as much by the system as by themselves."

"It is easy to fight obvious tyranny; it is not easy to fight benevolence, and few things are more calculated to rob the individual of his defenses than the idea that his interests and those of society can be wholly compatible."

"He must fight The Organization. Not stupidly, or selfishly, for the defects of individual self-regard are no

more to be venerated than the defects of co-operation. But fight he must, for the demands for his surrender are constant and powerful, and the more he has come to like the life of organization the more difficult does he find it to resist these demands, or even to recognize them. It is wretched, dispiriting advice to hold before him the dream that ideally there need be no conflict between him and society. There always is; there always must be. Ideology cannot wish it away; the peace of mind offered by organization remains a surrender, and no less so for being offered in benevolence. That is the problem."

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### **Drew says**

There is a copy of this book in the Smithsonian Museum of American History, in the transportation section. So much of our world has been defined by the postwar suburban mode of living -- and the tenuousness of highly leveraged families is laid out as a stark warning back in the 50's. I think that there are a number of folks still living in this world today ... though the organizations themselves have less and less use for them.

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### **Michael says**

As an architect interested in US settlement patterns, I was mainly underwhelmed with this one. Perhaps it's the constant references to *Organization Man* in seemingly every other book or journal article that has touched on the subject of suburbia. Not that it shouldn't be referenced -- a couple parts were interesting - but there's the issue that most of the other authors obvious haven't read Whyte's book! I'm not going into detail as it was a while back when I spent way too much time with this, but far from critiquing the lameness of the "organization" guy (yes, most of the ladies were still housewives...or house wives again after WWII anyway) and the irresponsible separatist flight into potato fields aided by big tailfin-bedecked Chevys, Whyte approaches the suburban dwellers of mid-century in a very methodically open-minded way. Despite my admiration for this, I was mostly bored to tears (no doubt the half-century separation exacerbated my ennui) and I felt, in contrast to the umpteen hundred times I've heard how provocative and indispensable this book is for any analysis of the physical/planning issues relevant to suburban culture, that only about 1.24 chapters were of any interest at all. And I recall said chapter (6? 12?) was the one with those terrific adjacency diagrams -- truly where Whyte shines...err, shone.

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### **Grace says**

This book was originally published in 1956 and reissued in 2002.

It was remarkably prescient in its warning against conformity and groupthink. Whyte advocated a healthy ecosystem of divergent personality types and thinking patterns in order to build more resilient companies/communities/societies. This is a very topical and thought-provoking book and I am enjoying it immensely.

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## Josh says

It's all that and a bag of myers briggs tests...

I love books like this, It calls bullshit on about a century of management theory, oddly enough, it was written in the middle of that century, making even more telling.

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## Liam says

"By social ethic I mean that contemporary body of thought which makes morally legitimate the pressures of society against the individual. Its major propositions are three: a belief in the group as the source of creativity; a belief in 'belongingness' as the ultimate need of the individual' and a belief in the application of science to achieve the belongingness." (7)

"Hell is no less hell for being antiseptic." (30-1)

"Potentially, they [private colleges] have a value far beyond their numbers as models and pace setters, but while most still give a good education they do it in camera. They are content simply to be. With very few exceptions -- five would be too generous a number -- they display no energy in showing their relevance to the rest of society, and the only issue which has roused them from their shameful torpor is the possibility of being taxed." (98)

"The premise is, simply, that the goals of the individual and the goals of the organization will work out to be the same." (129)

"[W]hatever else it has, it has no panache." (of Park Forest, 299)

"The group is a tyrant; so also is it a friend, and it is both at once." (361)

"Here, finally, is the apotheosis of the social ethic. Some might summarize the suburban temper in different terms -- pragmatism, perhaps, or utilitarianism -- and their intonation would depend on their own outlook. But the dominant motif is unmistakable. Not just as something expedient, but as something right, the organization transients have put social usefulness at the core of their beliefs. Adaptation has become more than a necessity; in a life in which everything changes, it has become almost a constant." (392-3)

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## Du says

Will this book ever be non relevant? I would be really surprised if it were. The information is not just intetesting, but well organized and consistently written in a clear and complex manner.

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## dv says

Abbastanza impressionante leggere oggi, nel 2016, questo libro scritto 60 anni fa (1956). La descrizione dell'etica sociale del lavoro, che ha sostituito quella protestante e ha generato gli "uomini



business would love to live down its this one. i think the second it came out there was a knee-jerk response to declare "THAT'S NOT US!" and hence-forth their have been plenty of books declaring 'the death of the organization man' in my opinion, its just further evidence of the business peoples inner insecurity for what they do.

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## Sally Duros says

The world has sure changed!

Published June 2003 in WorldWIT.  
Taking the Organization out of the Man  
Sally's World, June 2003  
<http://www.sallyduros.com/taking-the-...>

By SALLY DUROS

There's a book I have to read. It's called The Organization Man. It was written in 1956 by William Whyte, and it's about time that I learned what the book says.

When I was a girl, I held a secret deep and true, and that was that somehow even though I was female I would grow up to be an "Organization Man." My dad was an Organization Man, and my best friend's dad was an Organization Man, and the kids' next door, their dad was an Organization Man.

I wasn't sure what it meant exactly - It was just a book laying around our house - but I knew my dad was one, in my simplistic view because he wore a hat, and a suit, and he went to work downtown every day. My dad would leave the house at the same time every morning. When the weather was warm he would walk to the train. You could hear the screen door slam. I would sometimes watch him exit, impressed by how fast he walked. It was a mile-and-a-half to the commuter train that took him to downtown Chicago where the train belched him out with thousands of other people, and they all walked with great intention and urgency to the gleaming revolving-glass doors of the skyscrapers where they worked, engaged in their important missions of commerce and building things and selling stuff. I knew about that because he would bring me downtown with him a couple of times a year to show me off to the other civil engineers he worked with.

His route home led him like clockwork every day, up the side streets of our north side Chicago neighborhood, until he hit the end of the alley on an adjacent street. Which is when I would spy him coming around the corner, and I would run fast up the alley and jump into his arms, the dependable arms of an Organization Man dad, and he would carry me back to my mom, and siblings and the house, and it was nice and cozy like a TV sitcom.

My dad brought home the scent of ink, paper and concrete, and his face felt rough at the end of the day, and I liked that. He carried a briefcase, and he often had work to do in the evening.

Although I couldn't read the book The Organization Man, I knew my dad was one. Nearly all the dads I knew were Organization Men, except Mr. McHenry, and he owned his own business, and that seemed very strange and mysterious, and he was around during the day and even had a small disassembled airplane in his back yard, which was very exotic and alien.

I was reminded of these childhood memories when I was chatting with Penny Pickett, Business Director for the Telecommunications Development Fund, at Springboard 2003-Midwest, the women's venture capital

forum. Penny was talking about the changes she has seen in the way businesses are viewed since she had started her own business first in 1980.

She started her business in 1980. When it was initially based in her home, it might solicit a condescending comment and a pat on the head. But when men headed to their garages and their basements after businesses embedding the culture of "The Organization Man" had mass layoffs during the 1980s, the conversation rose to another level. That's when the descriptive word "entrepreneur" emerged.

A basic tenet of The Organization Man was the idea that an employee gave the corporation loyalty and, in turn, the corporation took care of you. Some folks referred to that disparagingly as corporate welfare. The book proposed that employees would have 20-, 30-, and 40-year careers with one corporation.

When my dad started working for the organization, it had about 60 employees based in Chicago. When he left, the company had about 700 working worldwide. When the company merged with another two years ago, it had about 1200, still a small-to-medium sized business by most measures.

My dad retired from the organization nearly two decades ago, with 35 years under his belt. His company merged with another one two years ago, but still the company sticks with its tradition of inviting every one who ever worked for the company to the holiday party. My dad still sees many of his colleagues from the old organization. He can thank the organization for financial stability for his family, a lifetime of friends, and work that challenged him and he enjoyed. My dad says that it was a pretty good deal.

If there was a downside to being an Organization Man, it was the spiritual demand the organization made on the individual.

"This book is about the organization man. If the term is vague, it is because I can think of no other way to describe the people I am talking about. They are not the workers, nor are they the white-collar people in the usual, clerk sense of the word. These people only work for The Organization. The ones I am talking about belong to it as well. They are the ones of our middle class who have left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organization life, and it is they who are the mind and soul of our great self-perpetuating institutions."

- From the book The Organization Man, William Whyte

As painful as the evolution has been, today we are seeking a spiritual anchor in work, and this has been especially liberating for dads. Today it is as common to see dads who are self employed as dads who are working for organizations. Dads and men, in general, once a rarity after school at playgrounds, are becoming increasingly common. Whether there by choice or because of a lay-off -most of them look pretty happy to be refereeing the basketball games, manning the tube swings, testing the jungle gym and toting the backpacks of their kids. That's an experience that the organization never granted my Dad and other Dads of his generation.

If the organization doesn't seem to have room for "The Organization Man" anymore, some of us have learned a new way to be in the world that means creating our own organization - even if it is only in our heads. This way of being isn't easier. But Pickett says, we are nonetheless learning new behaviors.

"People today are more flexible and more entrepreneurial, even if they do go to big companies," she says. "More people are biting the bullet and learning the characteristics of entrepreneurs."

This brought to mind a friend of mine who has adapted the mindset of a contract employee, even though she is a full-time employee. Pickett believes that given the choice people like my friend would elect for a more comfortable work lifestyle.

One also shouldn't confuse the heart-sets of a small-business owner and that of an entrepreneur, Pickett says.

"A capable business owner is the person who's been pink-slipped and is desperate; they need an income," she says. "They haven't been able to find a job, so they start a company."

"Small-business owners, we couldn't survive without them," she says. "They build good companies. They provide services that we all use. They're important to their communities. They pay their taxes. They're good people. They're just not driven the way entrepreneurs are."

"The entrepreneur is somebody who tends to be pretty bright, but tends to get fairly bored," she says. "They like to learn new situations, but once they've done that they will get bored fairly quickly if it becomes routine. An entrepreneur has a real need to fix things, to improve things, to really change the world. Now money may be the thing that you keep score with, but in many ways, I don't think money is the real goal."

"An entrepreneur is a do-gooder who has a strong conviction that there's something that they can do that's going to make the world better or make people's lives better or solve something that really is hurting a lot of people," Pickett says. "They'd like to make money. That's great, because in many ways, making a lot of money just gives them the cushion where they can flush out other ideas. It's a vision thing."

I look at it this way, if the small-business owner is the eagle on the U.S. seal, and the entrepreneur is the cowboy on the frontier, then The Organization Man should be honored on the face of our dollar bills.

Today, Dads are just as likely to be one as another, and Father's Day is the time to honor all of them. Happy Father's Day, Dad!

Recommended reading for this Father's Day: The Organization Man, by William Whyte; Not Just A Living by Mark Henricks; Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity by David Whyte; and Sacred Hoops by Phil Jackson. The Organization Man: The Book That Defined a Generation Not Just A Living: The Complete Guide To Creating A Business That Gives You A Life Crossing the Unknown Sea Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior

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## **Michael David says**

This book is interesting as a zeitgeist of 1950s corporate America, but is obsolete nowadays. Its chapters on The Organization Man in fiction were enjoyable, but the Organization as a surrogate father seems to be a pipe dream nowadays. Companies focus nowadays on efficiency (outsourcing is one of its methods of getting a job done), and the paternalistic Organization of yesteryear is all but extinct.

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## **Ted says**

**I changed this to a 3 1/2 on the assumption that if I read it again (assuming I could get through it) I'd think a bit more of it than I did 53+ years ago.**

(originally posted 1/25/13)

I read this book fifty years ago now, in the summer of '62. It was to be read before starting my freshman year in college.

I don't think I got much out of it. Although I had had good marks in high school, I came from a small town in

the Midwest. My classmates in college were mostly from big high schools in the east. Some of them may have been sophisticated enough to see what Whyte was talking about, or more likely just recognized their own fathers from his narrative. My dad was a school teacher in that small town, hence had nothing in common with Whyte's Organization Man; and hence I really didn't know what he was talking about, I suppose. It *was* a long time ago.

The other thing was, one had to have something of a grown-up point of view to take in a book like this, it certainly wasn't written for kids. But when I entered college, I *was* a kid. I *learned* about grown-up outlooks, things of real interest to adults, *how to be an adult* in college. Kids in, adults (or, adults-on-the-way) out. That was college for me.

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### **Richard says**

I read this about a dozen years ago in grad school, and I believe it is one of the seminal academic books of mid-century America. Whyte documented the radical shift in social importance that large corporations had attained along with their economic preeminence.

However, the book is obsolete as anything but sociological history. The faithful organization man required a paternalistic corporation to make sense, and that pairing collapsed with the advent of deep international competition in the seventies and eighties. Today, there is no lack of scathing criticism concerning the faithlessness of the typical corporation, and wise employees have long learned to plan for the possibility of being laid off, even by a corporation that is profitable.

For a more complete view of the impact the book made at the time, and on the author's later contributions, the Economist has an excellent short review of this classic [here](#).

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### **Terri Griffith says**

I bookmooched this just to read a couple of chapters on a Chicago suburb called Park Forest. I started reading somewhere in the middle and became so engrossed that when I finished I started back at the beginning. On the surface it would appear that a book that discusses the rise of the company businessman (white men, all) would yield nothing important to my life, but instead this book gave me a glimpse into an America that I never knew first hand yet is still mythologized by the media and Republicans. Most of the sources are from the 40s and 50s. Also, as contemporary readers we know how it all turned out--how all those suburban kids of the 50s turned into the hippies of the 60s. We also see that this model of business, an employee faithful to a company for an entire career, faded away. In fact, the generation that Whyte writes about is really the only one to receive the benefits of a job like this. Some of the companies he writes about ultimately smoked their employees with retirement, downgrades, things like that. The chapter on the way suburban neighborhoods work is great.

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### **Nathan Storrington says**

Whyte's cultural analysis of the American corporation is an aging classic. While incredibly influential at the

time, its content and structure don't necessarily hold up to contemporary standards.

There are still some great insights here, particularly about the tensions within the American ethos in general, as well as a prescient socio-spatial analysis of suburban neighborhoods near the end of the book that foreshadows Whyte's later work on public space. You can also see how his ideas, methodologies and style influenced the early work of the urbanist Jane Jacobs, particularly in his preference for observation and firsthand research, his belief in individuality and skepticism for the corporation, and his influential interpretation of the suburbs as homogenous, stifling places (though others like Herbert Gans would later challenge this assumption). However, *The Organization Man* can also be tedious at times, reminding a contemporary reader of the pop nonfiction of today but without the pithy brevity and candy-coated prose of a Malcolm Gladwell or Steven Johnson type.

In some ways, many of the foibles and myths Whyte explores in this book can still be seen today, particularly in Silicon Valley where Whyte's longing for the rugged individual genius and concern over the emerging organization society have strangely merged into a strange hybrid. But you'll have to do a fair bit of your own archaeology to understand what *The Organization Man* means for America today.

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### **Doug Garnett says**

This is a tremendous book - and I thoroughly recommend it for anyone involved in business. The lessons are as fresh and important today as they were 50-60 years ago. If you will, the "Organization Man" won out and we've forgotten Whyte's lessons about why this will be a problem.

Have to say, though, the modern intro is a silly introduction. Some writer (probably well know) at *Fortune* tells us "nice read but we don't have these problems any more"... Yikes. I don't think he's ever lived within the world of the companies he covers. Probably talks with the c-level execs and, of course, they paint a perfect picture.

William Whyte's writing is perceptive and thorough. The one serious challenge I found as a modern reader was in the first chapters where he reflects a 1950's analysis of where women can fit in a corporation - so be forewarned he observes they are "secretaries".

Once past that section, his sections on testing and on genius are absolutely outstanding. Also some of the chapters on suburbs are brilliant - although I skipped through the first couple. If you read it, check the Wikipedia page on the Park Forest suburb outside Chicago where Whyte did extensive studies.

The chapter "The Fight Against Genius" is brilliant and may be my favorite. And despite the *Fortune* editor's theory, we did NOT learn these lessons. Even the poster child Google didn't pay attention. Google's "20% allowable" for working on "whatever you want" hasn't really delivered what it intended. Whyte could predict this - he discusses a similar structure in a company in the 1950's...which also doesn't do what's intended - driving far too applied research rather than blue sky research.

All in all, this book should be mandatory today. And I hate those reviews which indicate it's "just for the 1950's". My experience with massive corporate world has made it clear: Business schools didn't learn the lessons from this book that they should have.

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## Lukas Szrot says

An important (and at times uncannily prophetic) counterpoint to the 'modernization and social progress' just-so story. Some of it is a bit dated, but the sections on religion and the academy are brilliant, and could have been written last year. The creeping sense that bureaucratization and rationalization would usher in a new era of conformity and mediocrity was delineated by Max Weber and Friedrich Nietzsche on the cusp of the twentieth century. "Organization Man" updates, extends, and challenges this critical line of thought which magnificently serves to inoculate us from technocratic hubris.

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