

Employment options

Half a Job: Bad and Good Part-Time Jobs in a Changing Labor Market. By Chris Tilly. Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press, 1996, 228 pp., bibliography. \$49.95, cloth; \$19.95, paper.

Just a Temp. By Kevin D. Henson. Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press, 1996, 202 pp., bibliography. \$49.95, cloth; \$16.95, paper.

The flexibility of the U.S. labor market has given rise to a number of employment options. Two of them—part-time jobs and jobs arranged through temporary help companies—are the subjects of recent books whose authors have supplemented existing survey data with original case studies.

Perhaps the largest category of non-standard work is part-time employment, which accounts for nearly one-fifth of the employed. While most part-timers work short hours by choice, the number of part-timers who would prefer full-time work has shown a long-term upward trend. In *Half a Job*, Chris Tilly seeks answers to some fundamental questions about this labor market phenomenon: why part-time employment has grown, what kinds of part-time jobs exist, and how businesses make decisions about and use part-time workers.

Well-written and accessible to the non-economist, the book begins with a discussion of the long-term increase in part-time employment, then covers the theoretical underpinnings of this study, the kinds of part-time jobs, and the strategies of firms with regard to part-time employment, and concludes with suggested policies toward part-time employment. In addition to examining data from large sample surveys, primarily the Current Population Survey, Tilly conducted 82 “semi-structured, face-to-face” interviews with employers, workers, and union officials in Boston and Pittsburgh in the late 1980s.

The book is sprinkled with excerpts from the interviews, providing an interesting glimpse into the thought processes of company managers and workers. The research focused on two industries: retail trade (especially grocery stores) and insurance, both service-providing industries with expanding employment but with very different strategies with respect to part-time employment. Retail trade has long depended on part-timers, while insurance has a mostly full-time work force.

In explaining the long-term increase in the overall incidence of part-time employment, Tilly considers, and dismisses, factors such as demographic changes, widening compensation differentials between full- and part-time workers, and long-term growth in unemployment. Instead, he argues, the explanation lies partly in the evolution in industry composition, as industries that have traditionally used more part-timers, such as retail trade and services, account for a growing share of the work force. Even more important, there has been greater use of part-time workers by almost every industry, as a variety of employers have adjusted their personal strategies to boost their use of part-timers.

Tilly identifies two types of part-time jobs, secondary and retention. Secondary part-time jobs, the most prevalent type, are typically valued by managers for their relatively low cost and greater flexibility in scheduling, and are characterized by high turnover and low skill requirements, pay, benefits, and productivity. Retention part-time jobs, on the other hand, are created to keep or attract valued employees who prefer part-time hours. Such jobs tend to have low turnover and high levels of skill, compensation, and productivity. Companies create retention part-time jobs, posits Tilly, to help offset an oversupply of involuntary full-time positions that forces some people to work more hours than they prefer. Put another way, retention jobs are created one at a time,

while secondary part-time jobs are created as whole classes. Tilly admits that the “half a job” designation applies only to some part-time jobs; retention jobs are considered “good jobs,” and even some secondary jobs are the choice of their holders.

In identifying the reasons for large disparities in the use of part-time employment between retail trade and insurance, Tilly identifies several industry-specific factors, including the importance of staff continuity, the use of career ladders, and whether the target work force is less skilled and short-term or more skilled and longer term. Industry by itself is not destiny, however; the firms’ own culture and traditions play an important role. Even within a given firm, decision makers hold differing opinions as to the efficacy of part-time help. For example, Tilly quotes supermarket managers who were resistant to their bosses’ desire to hire more part-time workers, whom the managers viewed as less committed and productive. The local labor market also is a determinant; assisted by technology, some firms have adopted part-time staffing strategies in response to the preferences of available workers. Operating with few legal constraints, companies have many staffing options, and Tilly’s skillful blending of qualitative and quantitative information helps us to understand the choices they make.

Unlike part-time work, whose share of employment has changed slowly, work intermediated by temporary help supply firms has increased six-fold since 1982. *Just a Temp* is a case study of the clerical side of the industry primarily from the perspective of the temporary workers.

While a graduate student in sociology, author Kevin Henson supported himself by “temping” as an office worker in Chicago. He began his research as “a coping strategy” to maintain his “sense of self against the onslaught of condescension” he faced on the job. Altogether, Henson conducted

open-ended interviews with 31 temps, 3 employees of temporary agencies, and 1 representative of a client company. In six chapters Henson discusses the history of the industry, who temporary workers are, the strategies they use to get assignments, the types of work offered to temps, the ways in which temps make a favorable impression on the assignment, and how they deal with the perceived stigma of the work. Henson also offers policy prescriptions to improve the lot of temporary workers.

As foreshadowed by the title, temporary work is portrayed as an almost unrelentingly bleak landscape of monotonous tasks, limited opportunity, and constrained behavior. Even aspects of temporary work that are often touted as advantages were not corroborated by this research. For instance, one benefit of temping often cited by the industry and workers alike is the flexibility to set one's own schedule. Yet the temps Henson interviewed rarely turned down work or interrupted an assignment for their own convenience. Another advantage of temping is said to be the variety of work settings and experiences. But the temps interviewed preferred the lev-

els of trust and comfort that came with being in one place for a while to the challenges of adjusting to frequent assignment changes.

Henson distinguishes between two types of temporary assignments: routine and coverage. Routine work involves single-task, highly standardized clerical assignments, such as stuffing envelopes or answering the telephone. These are often described as "bad jobs" by temporary workers. In the other type of assignment, coverage work, a temp replaces or fills in for a permanent employee, and performs a variety of tasks, exercises some autonomy over the execution of the tasks, and has opportunities for social interaction. Not surprisingly, coverage work was rated more highly than routine work and was sometimes even described as "good jobs" by the temps.

The focus of this qualitative study is on the various accommodations made by the temps and the interpersonal relationships engendered by the work. There are trenchant comments on these topics from interviewees and perceptive commentary by the author. The pecuniary aspects of the job on the other

hand, are virtually ignored. There is almost no discussion of workers' earnings, for example, nor of the availability of employer-provided benefits. One wonders, for instance, whether the temps had concerns regarding their wages, health insurance, and pension coverage.

Even more problematic is the very small sample of workers used in the study. The temps interviewed were demographically, geographically, and occupationally far less diverse than the Nation's temporary help work force of 2 million. The workers' accounts nearly always confirmed the author's gloomy views but seldom were supported with survey data. Despite these limitations, Henson presents a sobering picture of a fast-growing industry that is worthwhile reading for the parties involved, especially, perhaps, for the staffs of the client companies who create the daily working conditions in which the temporary workers operate.

—Sharon R. Cohany

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