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COMPARING THE WORTH OF JOBS

Recently I appeared on an audience-participation television program to discuss the controversial concept called "Comparable Worth." At the top of the show, the hostess undertook the task of defining the issue.

She asked the some 75 persons in the audience, most of whom were women, "How many of you have ever held jobs in the paid labor force?" About four out of five promptly put up their hands. Then the hostess asked, "How many of you felt you were discriminated against on the job because you were a woman?" Only one woman raised her hand.

The hostess rushed over to that woman, shoved a microphone in her face, and said, "Tell us how you were discriminated against?" "Well, I was a secretary," she said, "and I worked harder than my boss, but he was paid more than I was."

That's exactly the problem involved in the concept called "Comparable Worth." Each person has his subjective opinion of his own job "worth" in "comparison" with other jobs. Each person thinks he is worth more than he is paid, that his job is more demanding, and that others are worth relatively less.

So the company hires an evaluator who comes in and interviews the employee and the employer on the "worth" of the job performed by the employee. No doubt the employer has a different perspective about wages from that of the employee, so decision-making about "worth" shifts to the evaluator.

In the famous AFSCME v. State of Washington case, which is the only case where a judge upheld the controversial concept of Comparable Worth, the hired evaluator named Willis & Associates came up with the following job evaluations: registered nurse 573; electrician 193, clerk-typist 152, and truck driver 97. That was supposed to be the comparative "worth" of those four jobs, according to Willis.

Here's how you can have a little fun for yourself. Write the names of those four jobs on a plain piece of paper, and then show that the registered nurse is rated at 573. Ask several of your friends the question, "If a registered nurse is worth 573 points, how

much do you think an electrician, a clerk-typist, and a truck driver are worth?"

Then, you can start over with a different piece of paper, show the names of the four jobs and only the 97 points for the truck driver. Ask several of your friends the question, "If a truck driver is worth 97 points, how much do you think a registered nurse, an electrician, and a clerk-typist are worth?"

You can make your game even more fun by including a nurse, an electrician, a clerk-typist, and a truck driver in your opinion survey. You'll find very quickly that how much some jobs are "worth" when "compared" with other jobs is a matter of subjective opinion; it depends exclusively on your point of view.

Does the nurse want an evaluator with a pro-truck driver or pro-electrician bias to evaluate her "worth"? Does the truck driver want an evaluator with a pro-nurse or pro-typist bias to evaluate his "worth"?

Does the blue-collar worker want an evaluator with a white-collar bias doing the evaluation? Or vice versa? Does the male worker want an evaluator with a feminist bias doing the evaluation? Or vice versa?

You have to be kidding to think that labeling a person an "evaluator" cleanses him/her of such biases. Evaluators are people and people are human. There is no objective standard of "worth" against which points can be quantified.

The elements in "worth" are just as elusive of quantification as "worth" itself. How can you put a numerical figure on the "worth" of "knowledge and skills," "mental demands," "accountability," or "working conditions"?

Do you agree with Willis, for example, that the "mental demands" on a nurse are worth 122 points, but the mental demands on an electrician, by comparison, are worth only 30 points and the mental demands on a truck driver are worth only 10 points? Do you agree with Willis that the "working conditions" of a nurse and an electrician each rate 11 points, while the working conditions of a truck driver rate 13 points?

The Comparable Worth concept is not only wholly subjective, it is arbitrary, too. The only people eligible for Comparable Worth raises are those who happen to choose occupations which have 70% or more males or 70% or more females.

If you happen to choose a job which has only 69% females, you are out of luck. The employer can simply keep gender percentages below 70% and avoid Comparable Worth raises.