This course will introduce students to debates regarding the transformation of work. Many argue that computers and high technology are increasing cognitive skill requirements at work and that organizational changes, such as the spread of teamwork or employee involvement practices, are also increasing the level of responsibilities employees are expected to shoulder. At the same time, some believe the education system is failing to produce students with the necessary skills, leading to a possible mismatch between worker competencies and job requirements. The issue of skills mismatch has also been raised in research on poverty and the potential obstacles facing former welfare recipients seeking employment. Perhaps most central, many of these ideas have also been used to explain recent increases in wage inequality in the wider labor market.

However, the data on which the discussions are based are often limited or flawed and important questions remain unanswered.

- What skills specifically are believed to be in short supply (basic reading, writing, and math; advanced intellectual skills; technology-related competencies; "problem-solving" abilities; interpersonal skills; motivation, work effort, and attitude; everything?)?

- Who is believed to lack the necessary skills (young workers, older workers, less educated workers, college graduates without science, engineering, or other technical backgrounds)?

- What is responsible for perceived skill shortages (technology, organizational changes, failing educational system, highly disadvantaged subgroups, simple demographics)?
- What is the actual evidence on which these concerns are based and how reliable is it? Is there a skills problem at all?

This course will give students a thorough grounding in the existing literature on the effects of high technology, employee involvement, skills mismatch, and growing wage inequality and will involve students in primary research on these subjects in the second half of the course.

Students will conduct survey and participant observation research at a workplace investigating issues raised in the course. The final project will be an analytical ethnographic paper based on this research. The goal will be to improve upon existing research in this area to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between technology, employee involvement, other management practices, job skill requirements, and worker outcomes.

The issues examined will have broad applicability to a number of debates. We will examine diverse work contexts in both manufacturing and services, covering managerial and professional work, as well as blue-collar and clerical work, and discuss the role of schools and training institutions, as well as employers.

This course will be useful to students interested in economic sociology, the sociology of work and labor markets, industrial relations, industrial/organizational psychology, human resource management, welfare-to-work, and sociology of education topics such as school-to-work and occupational and vocational education. The hands-on research focus will give students useful experience, can serve as the basis for MA theses, and may help satisfy research methods requirements in some departments.

**Requirements:** The format of the class will be a seminar. Attendance is mandatory. Gaining a full understanding of the materials requires participation in discussions, particularly for the research-focused segment.

It is anticipated that student research at the work sites will begin in mid-October. Students are required to conduct interviews and observe employees at work for four hours per week for six weeks. Students must hand in copies of their work and be prepared to share their experiences informally with the class each week. The goal is for students to learn from each other's experiences, share suggestions, and remain on track. Given how easy it is to fall seriously behind, coming prepared with new interview materials to discuss in class will be a relatively rigid requirement. Please check with me if you think you will be unable to work at your site before class for a particular week.

The readings during the research phase of the course will probably be divided among students so that the material can be covered without interfering with the research.

**Readings:** All articles will be available on-line unless noted below.
Week 1. The Problem—Why the Interest in Job Quality Now?


Sheldon Danziger and Peter Gottschalk, "Why Inequality of Earnings Increased" from *America Unequal* (1995)


Recommended

David R. Howell, "Institutional Failure and the American Worker: The Collapse of Low-Skill Wages" (1997)

Week 2. The Earlier Debate Over Skills and Some Recent Extensions


Recommended


Weeks 3. Information Technology, Skills, and Work—Sociological Approaches


Ruth Milkman and Cydney Pullman, "Technological Change in an Auto Assembly Plant." *Work and Occupations* (May 1991)

Weeks 4-5. Information Technology, Skills, and Wages—Economic Approaches

A. Econometric Approaches


David Autor, Lawrence Katz, and Alan Krueger, "Computing Inequality: Have Computers Changed the Labor Market?" *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (1998). Read 1169-1176 (stop after first three lines of p.1176), 1180-1181 (stop at Section B), 1185-1195 (stop at Section VI), 1202-1203. JSTOR

B. Inside the Black Box and Critiques


Week 6. Strategies for Understanding and Measuring Job Quality and Principles of Fieldwork and Survey Methodology


Michael J. Handel, proposal and draft, "Survey on Job Skill Requirements, Technology, and Work Organization."


Week 8. Understanding Modern Quality Control Techniques

Mary Walton, The Deming Management Method (selections)

Other selections to be announced

The Problem

National Commission on Excellence in Education A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform, report to U.S. Secretary of Education (1983)


Cognitive Skills: Trends in Levels and Rewards


Educational Attainment and Jobs Skills
Lester C. Thurow, “Education and Economic Equality” The Public Interest (1972)


Michael Handel, “Skills Mismatch in the Labor Market”

Policy Responses


James Heckman, "Is Job Training Oversold?" The Public Interest (1994??)


**Week 11. Tacit and Practical Skills**


**Weeks 12-13. Soft Skills, Work Attitudes and Habits, and the Issues of Race and Gender Bias**

*Positive Work Attitudes or Cognitive Skills?*


*Soft Skills and Race*

Jolene Kirchenman and Kathryn Neckerman, "'We'd Love to Hire Them, But...’ The Meaning of Race for Employers.” In *The Urban Underclass* Christopher Jencks and Paul Peterson eds. (1991)


*Gender and the Social Definition of Skill*

**Week 14. Is There a Skills Crisis?**


Ruy Teixiera, "Rural and Urban Manufacturing Workers: Similar Problems, Similar Changes" (1998)


**Week 15. Class Presentations of Final Projects**