

Working for Free: PW Talks with Craig Lambert

By Michael M. Jones | Apr 10, 2015

In [Shadow Work: The Unpaid, Unseen Jobs That Fill Your Day](#), former Harvard magazine deputy editor Craig Lambert takes a fresh look at the problem of work-life balance.

What is “shadow work”?

All of the unpaid jobs we do on behalf of businesses and organizations. They’re found in all parts of life: at home, at the office, on the Internet, recreation, travel, restaurants, shopping. The term first came from Ivan Illich’s 1981 book of the same name, but I expand on it. It’s in the shadows in that we often don’t notice that we’re doing work that used to be done by somebody else.

What inspired you to tackle this subject?

I was in the supermarket here in Boston, and I saw a lawyer I knew slightly, a woman who probably earns at least \$300,000 a year. I saw her scanning and bagging her own groceries, and I thought about that and asked, “Why is someone who’s making big money like that doing entry-level work and not even getting paid?”

In a rather timely example, we have to do our own taxes.

Exactly. That’s a huge amount of shadow work. Of course, you can delegate a certain amount of it to a tax preparer, but even then, you’ve got to bring them the information. It’s an unpaid job that has been given to us by our government.

Did you run into anything that surprised you while researching the book?

I was interested in how far self-service has come in restaurants. You have tablets on tables replacing waiters and waitresses. In certain fast food outlets, they're starting to use kiosks that allow consumers to place their own orders. A busboy isn't necessarily going to come by and clear off your table at Wendy's or Starbucks. That's your job.

One of the book's themes is that shadow work reduces interaction with other people.

Obviously, if you're at the supermarket, scanning and bagging your groceries yourself, you're not going to be dealing with a cashier. If you're using Zipcar, there's no agent. When you go to a hotel, many chains have kiosks in the lobby that allow you to get your room key, check in, and check out. This can be done with robotics, essentially.

What do you want readers to take away from your book?

I think the primary thing is to raise awareness. I consider shadow work a new lens for looking at familiar aspects of life. My hope is that people will come away with a heightened awareness of the trade-offs they make in daily life. You'll be making a choice on purpose, as opposed to sleepwalking.