Adapting to the changing nature of work

Interviewer: Today we’d like to welcome to the studio professors Tom Kochan and Paul Osterman. They’re here to talk about the Institute for Work and Employment Research (IWER). Welcome gentlemen. Maybe we could start off by telling the audience a little bit about the center, what they do, how long it’s been around.

Tom: The center started in 1937. It used to be called the Industrial Relations section. And about 10 years ago we modernized the name of the section to catch up with the changing nature of work and the kind of activities that we are involved in. Basically we study work and employment issues both in the private sector and in the public sector, both from the standpoint of individual firms as well as national policy issues. We have a very, very strong PhD program, which is basically the core of our activities in working to train the next generation of academics, who then go around to other universities to teach and to do research.

Paul: I think that’s right, in terms of our teaching, in the MBA program we teach courses on human resource management and negotiations. And in the past we’ve taught courses in entrepreneurship too, which we may continue to do. The Sloan Fellows, we do leadership and human resource management, leaders from manufacturing or the new name for that. We also do leadership in HR.

Interviewer: The center’s clearly been around for a long time, are there any trends that have literally kind of in employment and HR management that have kind of been around for a long time versus things that are very, very new to the work environment.

Tom: Let me talk about one long tradition and then ask Paul to talk about a particular set of new developments, but clearly our group has always had a strong focus on labor and employment policy. And that means that we work very hard to both understand and be on the cutting edge of research on national policy issues as well as maintain good strong contacts out in industry, in the business community, in the labor community, and in the government policy community. And so that’s always been a very, very important piece of it. So Paul’s been really on the forefront to helping us look at different groups in the labor force; low-wage workers, middle managers, and executives, and try and understand how those areas are changing both here and around the world.

Paul: Sure so let me give some other examples. So a faculty member in our group, Emilio Castilla, has done a lot of work on issues around performance assessment and discrimination and opportunities for advancement in the work place. So that’s gotten a lot of attention. A new faculty member, Ofer Sharone, works on unemployment and
how people think about unemployment, think about, interpret the fact that they’re unemployed. And in this environment that’s obviously a very, very important issue. A number of faculty members in the group are currently working on issues around regulation and labor market standards.

**Interviewer:** It seems like a lot of the other centers are kind of a very holistic approach as well. You’ve got folks that I know are known for specializing in sustainability, or leadership, or other things. They seem to be bringing that, through that lens, addressing these issues.

**Tom:** Right, we’re very interdisciplinary. So among the faculty in the group are an economist, political scientist, sociologist, industrial relations specialist. So we’ve always made a big effort to be interdisciplinary and to be open to a variety of perspectives, but also to go beyond being open to them, to kind of want to bring them in because it makes for a richer environment.

**Interviewer:** So now you say you have PhD students, the folks that might be students attracted to the program. What would the areas that they would be typically interested in or interested in studying?

**Tom:** Well I think our students have been on the forefront of helping us to adapt to the changing nature of work. So if you go back, let’s say ten or so years, we had a lot of students who were looking at how work gets reorganized, how to develop high levels of productivity, enhancing strategies and organizations, and how to engage the work force because that was an area that was right on the forefront of our field. Now we have a more eclectic set of interests. Students are interested in questions of the global supply chain. We’ve got students now who are interested in low wage labor markets, a new student who has come in. And we have a number of students working on the international side, on migration issues, on the ways in which you deal with people who cross borders both in terms of personal migration, but also in terms of work flowing across borders. So all of these are a reflection on the changing nature of work and the changing issues and our students are usually a few years ahead of us in helping to see where the field is going.

**Interviewer:** It sounds like that you have a tremendous opportunity to have a real impact on policy.

**Paul:** That’s right, I mean, I think our broad perspective on this is that this is a period of time in which a lot of labor markets institutions are being rethought and reconsidered, both in, at the level of the firm, in terms of how the firms organize work as they introduce teams and high-performance systems. And also at the state and federal level as labor market policy is being reconsidered. And so, this is a great time to be in this field and that’s why we’re so active, both kind of intellectually but also in terms of policy.
Interviewer: Excellent. Well thank you very much, both of you for coming in today. Feel free to come back at any time and tell us about other research that you’re working on.

Tom: Maybe just one other thing that we could add because we are talking about this. Given the fact that we are in a state of flux and given the fact that the world is really more, is thirsty for understanding the issues of the day, we’re thinking of becoming more proactive of communicating with the external world through blogs and other kinds of things. Each of us does this individually, but I think we could do more as a group and that’s clearly part of the changing nature of the way we do research and communicate.