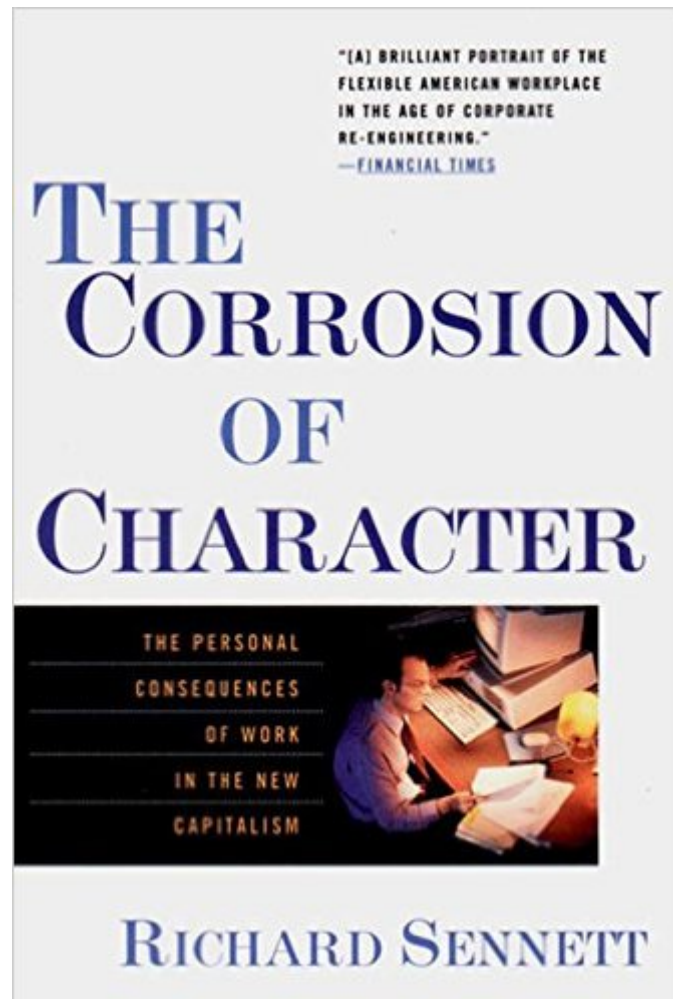


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# The Corrosion Of Character: The Personal Consequences Of Work In The New Capitalism



## Synopsis

A Business Week Best Book of the Year.... "A devastating and wholly necessary book." •Studs Terkel, author of *Working In The Corrosion of Character*, Richard Sennett, "among the country's most distinguished thinkers . . . has concentrated into 176 pages a profoundly affecting argument" (Business Week) that draws on interviews with dismissed IBM executives, bakers, a bartender turned advertising executive, and many others to call into question the terms of our new economy. In his 1972 classic, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (written with Jonathan Cobb), Sennett interviewed a man he called Enrico, a hardworking janitor whose life was structured by a union pay schedule and given meaning by his sacrifices for the future. In this new book-a #1 bestseller in Germany-Sennett explores the contemporary scene characterized by Enrico's son, Rico, whose life is more materially successful, yet whose work lacks long-term commitments or loyalties. Distinguished by Sennett's "combination of broad historical and literary learning and a reporter's willingness to walk into a store or factory [and] strike up a conversation" (New York Times Book Review), this book "challenges the reader to decide whether the flexibility of modern capitalism . . . is merely a fresh form of oppression" (Publishers Weekly, starred review). Praise for *The Corrosion of Character*: "A benchmark for our time." •Daniel Bell "[A]n incredibly insightful book." •William Julius Wilson "[A] remarkable synthesis of acute empirical observation and serious moral reflection." •Richard Rorty "[Sennett] offers abundant fresh insights . . . illuminated by his concern with people's struggle to give meaning to their lives." •[Memphis] Commercial Appeal

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

London School Of Economic's Richard Sennett (no relation to Mack Sennett of Keystone Kops fame) has written an important and eminently readable short book (a long essay, really) about the personal consequences of work in the "new capitalism." His book, titled *THE CORROSION OF CHARACTER* (1998), explains in clear and compelling terms how things have changed for the worse in the workplace, and how this has affected workers negatively. Sennett begins by explaining how personal character is attacked by the "new capitalism". He states that routine was an evil of the old capitalism, and that in recent times, the workplace was made "flexible" by means of the restructuring of time (flextime, part time jobs, increased use of swing and graveyard type shifts, etc.). He then asserts that modern forms of labor are difficult to understand (he calls them "illegible"), and implies, persuasively, that the very murkiness of these new forms has enabled employers to victimize employees in new ways. Author Sennett goes on to discuss the subject of risk, much ballyhooed and heavily sold as a good thing in recent times. Sennett disagrees. He states that risk-taking has become disorienting and depressing in today's world and workplace. Sennett goes on to say that the work ethic has changed for the worse, and that workers have become enmired in inevitable and depressing failure. He describes the various ways workers caught in all this have tried unsuccessfully to cope with failure, and seems to be headed for a sad ending to his book. However, the last chapter of *THE CORROSION OF CHARACTER* offers some hope.

Richard Sennett takes a very interesting look at the changing workplace and the possible links to its changes. He looks at the effects that the new workplace has taken on people's lives and their families. He gives vivid comparisons between the past generations and how character had its effect in their jobs and how today's jobs have an effect on character. Sennett doesn't just take a 90's perspective, but instead looks into the past at what the motivations and goals of the workers were centuries before. In 1972 Sennett wrote a book, along with Jonathan Cobb, called "The Hidden Injuries of Class". The book is about a man named Enrico who was a janitor. Enrico's job was both routine and not very mentally challenging. The reason that he was content with his job was because he had goals to improve the lives of his children. His vision canceled out most of the mental and physical drain that his job entailed. He also looks back at when most jobs were what he calls "routine" and what people thought of about habitual labor. Diderot believed that routine labor was good. He thought that the repetitive actions enabled the worker to become an expert and increasingly develop their skills. He explained that in a factory if each worker were to become an

expert at their individual task, that the result would be the best possible product produced at the best possible efficiency. Adam Smith had different views. He believed that routine work "deadened the mind." Sennett points out that today the world has followed Smith's ideas. Pride among the workers has dissipated. When a person starts from the bottom and works to the top they appreciate what they have earned and what they have produced. Today the goal is to skip or zoom past the earning stage.

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