

Student Handout 3-Working at Wanamaker's

When John Wanamaker opened his first true department store in 1876 a key component of his success was the hiring of good workers to run the cash registers, glass counters, and stock rooms. Previously, most small stores were run by men who prodded customers to buy and aggressively haggled with them over prices. By the 1890s though, most department stores across the country had these positions filled by young, single women, often from families of limited means and still living at home. Department store jobs were undesirable then, as they often involved long hours of work, anywhere from ten to sixteen hour days, including work on holidays and weekends. Pay was low, no benefits existed for the workers, and many believed that the job exposed women to be taken advantage of by “mashers”, or men lurking around the store up to no good.¹ For years, religious, labor, and women's organizations worked to improve the working conditions and pay for these “shop girls;” however, at John Wanamaker's stores, things were already quite different.

Wanamaker held his workers in high regard, believing that the happier his workers, the better they would treat his customers. He often said that “We are not simply a store” but “a family.”² He provided job security for all of his employees, ensuring that they would keep their jobs, despite hard times at the store. He also created a mutual aid society where workers invested 20 cents a month in exchange for treatment if they fell ill. Another benefit Wanamaker offered included a retirement plan that paid long-term employees half their salary when they could no longer work. He pioneered shorter hours--cutting workdays from twelve hours to ten hours per day, and he even provided two weeks summer vacation. Also, a devoutly religious man, he always closed the store on Sundays and for Christian holidays. Wanamaker's greatest benefit to his workers though was his offering of free education for them. Classes at night taught business skills, helping workers receive promotions, while other courses taught those who did not finish high school.

Life was not perfect for Wanamaker's workers; they still had to work long hours on their feet and deal with persistent customers daily. All of them were paid a weekly salary that was just as low in other department stores since Wanamaker had to keep wages down to compete with his rivals. Workers who were late or acted inappropriately were fined, and any clerk who lost money had to pay for it out of their own pocket. Wanamaker would only hire workers who spoke English as their primary language, and he refused to have anything to do with labor unions because he felt they would create divided loyalty and conflicts within the store. Despite these setbacks, most people enjoyed working at Wanamaker's and would often see Mr. Wanamaker personally stroll through the aisles during the day. He was always cordial to his employees and was a pioneer amongst department store owners for the care he showed his workers at the time.

Bibliography

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Whitaker, Jan. *Service and Style: How the American Department Store Fashioned the Middle Class*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006.

¹ Jan Whitaker, *Service and Style: How the American Department Store Fashioned the Middle Class* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 102.

² Herbert Ershkowitz, *John Wanamaker: Philadelphia Merchant*. (Conshohocken: Combined Publishing, 1999), 122.