

# A letter on auto industry job cuts

9 September 1998

To the editor:

I read a front page article in the *Detroit News / Free Press* this morning (Saturday, Sept. 5) entitled 'Ford starts job-rating buyouts next week: Some employees face being labeled sub-par.' It explained that Ford Motor Company would begin offering buyouts--that is, laying off--about 2,000 salaried employees who have been deemed 'sub-par, having limited potential, or whose skills are no longer relevant.'

As someone who has worked on a contract assignment at one of the Big Three, General Motors, let me give you my take on what this is about. Each auto company is seeking to cut costs through laying off white collar employees, but who gets the axe and who remains is certainly not determined by competence. It's determined by who you know, who you butter up, what connections you have. I worked with one woman who had no computer skills and was able to get management to fire another employee with those skills, which she saw as a threat to her position.

In another department, one woman was made network supervisor although she had a very limited knowledge of computers. She had no formal training in page layout programs and yet was made supervisor of the desktop publishers, who also had no formal training (unless you count a one-day course). She was then given a very prominent position in communications support on a national level. She routinely would try to get people fired who were skilled graphic artists and writers. She also managed to get a relative hired who acted as her flunky and spy in another department.

Far from encouraging employees to become highly skilled, management rewarded and retained mediocrity. People who knew the lingo, the latest buzzwords, the company jargon could go far. It wasn't necessary for them to really think, analyze, or understand anything.

I'm sure this is the situation at Ford. The company announced in July that it would begin an evaluation of its 53,000 salaried employees. Under the guise of an

objective evaluation of an employees' merit, managers decided each worker's fate. The layoff, according to this new and 'rational' method, is the employee's own fault--for being a 'low performer.'

But who will actually be given the boot? Employees who are not in with the in crowd, or who have spoken up too many times when they see things being done wrong, or are so skilled they make their supervisors look incompetent will find themselves on the unemployment line. When they apply for jobs at other companies, they will carry the stigma of being labeled 'sub-par.' They may have to take jobs with far less pay and benefits because they have been branded as having 'limited potential.' They stand no chance of being hired by GM or Chrysler. And this from a company which announced record profits of \$6 billion this year.

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