THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

THEN AND NOW: THE BIG SHIFT AT WORK

By Lauren Weber and Stephanie Stamm
September 2, 2017

A couple generations ago, workers in the U.S. could expect a 9-to-5 schedule, retirement benefits, generous health insurance and a sense that they could spend years, even decades, at a single company. Today, workers have more flexibility over how they do their jobs and more control over what they do. But the safety net that once came with full-time work has frayed.

The workday is getting longer. In 1973, 6 percent of Americans complained of working excessive hours, according to a report based on government data.

In 2016, 26 percent of workers said they usually worked more than 48 hours a week.

In 1973, 7 percent said they had difficulty completing their work in the time allotted.

In 2016, half of U.S. workers said they worked during their free time at least occasionally.

Work is demanding, too. Two-thirds of American workers say their jobs require them to spend at least half of their time working at high speeds or meeting tight deadlines.

In 1980, 97 percent of full-time workers at large and medium-size companies received health insurance through their employers. Most of them didn't pay a dime for it.

72 percent of workers with single coverage paid no premium.

51 percent of workers with family coverage paid no premium.

In 2016, 61 percent of all workers, full-time and part-time, at large companies had employer-sponsored health insurance.

Counting small companies, which are less likely to offer insurance, that share drops to 55 percent.

Few employers paid the full cost of the insurance: 12 percent of those with single coverage paid no premium in 2016.

3 percent of those with family coverage paid no premium.

Even though many people report working long hours to handle increased workloads, employers are providing more benefits that aid work-life balance.

In 1979, 56 percent of full-time workers at medium and large companies received paid days off to treat an illness or injury.

In 2016, 76 percent of all full-time workers received paid days off to treat an illness or injury.

In 1995, 2 percent of full-time workers at medium and large companies had access to paid parental leave.

In 2016, 16 percent of all full-time workers had access to paid parental leave.

Workers also have more say over when and where they work. In 1995, 2 percent employees were allowed to work remotely.

By 2016, 8 percent were. The Society for Human Resource Management estimates that number to be much higher.

Before the 1980s, pensions were the most common form of employer-sponsored retirement plan. In 1979, 38 percent of all private-sector workers participated in a pension plan, with their employers guaranteeing a preset monthly payout to retirees.

Just 13 percent of private-sector workers had pension plans in 2014.

In 1979, 17 percent of workers had 401(k) accounts.

That rose to 45 percent with 401(k) plans in 2014.

Today, more private-sector workers have access to an employer-sponsored plan of some kind: 66 percent in 2017. . .

. . . compared with 57 percent in 2003.

The changes in the workplace have coincided with a shifting relationship between employers and their workers.

The share of Americans represented by unions has shrunk, meaning workers have less bargaining power to maintain generous benefits and job security.

In 1983, 16.8 percent of private-sector workers belonged to unions.

In 2016, 6.4 percent of private-sector workers belonged to unions.

The proportion of Americans working as temps or independent contractors, meanwhile, is on the rise. These roles often come without retirement or health benefits. In 1995, 10 percent of U.S. workers were in these “contingent” arrangements.

By 2015, 15.8 percent were.

Workers now get a smaller piece of the economic pie in the form of wages and benefits than they once did.

Economists and management experts say CEOs and boards today put shareholders’ concerns ahead of employee needs. Driving up the stock price – often by cutting costs – and distributing earnings through dividends and share buybacks keeps investors happy.

The biggest share of companies' output still goes to workers, but that share is shrinking as companies spend less on both employee compensation and capital investment. Meanwhile, investors are getting three times the payout they did 30 years ago.

As automation replaces or transforms many jobs, employers and workers may come to depend on each other even less. Estimates vary, but some experts say that 50 percent of the tasks workers do in today's global economy could be automated using technology that already exists.