

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

IN WORKERS WE TRUST — OR DO WE IN TODAY’S CULTURE?

This Labor Day weekend, I find myself thinking about work ethic — and what it really means in the aftermath of the pandemic. We’ve long defined work ethic as a commitment: to your employer and job — and to working hard (and with pride) to deliver the best results possible, no matter the circumstances. It’s a quaint notion that sounds out of touch at a time when employees are reassessing their relationship to work. It began with the Great Resignation in early 2021. Unsettled by the pandemic, people considered their work — and workplaces — with fresh perspective. Some questioned whether they even liked their company culture, or if their job was as meaningful as they wanted it to be. Now the Great Resignation has a companion, dubbed “quiet quitting.” Rather than going above and beyond in their jobs, quiet quitters log off their computers at the end of the workday, promptly. They decline additional tasks, especially if unpaid. It’s caught on as a self-care technique — an

antidote to the workplace grind. And on this Labor Day, like last, “help wanted” signs abound. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 11.2 million unfilled jobs at the end of July 2022 — nearly two jobs for every American seeking work. Despite these markers, some employers haven’t gotten the memo. They still think about work ethic in old-fashioned terms: If you’re not glued to your desk or work station, you can’t be doing your job. So they’ve turned to electronic surveillance as a way to monitor employee efficiency and productivity. I knew about the use of surveillance at Amazon, where it became a public relations nightmare. Among the company’s practices was their measurement of “time off task” — the amount of time warehouse workers weren’t directly performing their job duties. It led to the firing of some high performers and sparked a unionization effort. Amazon has retooled the system to look only into idle periods longer than 15 minutes. But I was surprised a couple of

weeks ago when I learned that eight of the 10 largest private employers in the U.S. are monitoring their employees, including Amazon. The surveillance technology is creepy — especially if employees don’t know they’re being monitored (rules vary from state to state). In a blog post last year, Darrell West, vice president and director of governance studies at the Brookings Institution, described the many ways in which employees are being surveilled — everything from webcams that monitor worker attentiveness to geolocation software that tracks physical movements to tools that analyze the content of emails and social media messages. The technology is also imperfect — better at tracking keystrokes than human interaction. A manager will often spend time in conversation with employees during their workday, yet some systems consider this away-from-computer time to be unproductive. On the podcast “The Daily,” New York Times reporter Jodi Kanter recently talked about the

surveillance phenomenon. She shared the story of Carol Kraemer, a finance executive whose employer only paid remote workers for the minutes when its tracking system detected active work. Offline work — like mentoring — didn’t register and required approval as “manual time.” If Kraemer forgot to turn on her time tracker, she had to appeal to be paid at all. Saying the quiet part loud, it seems that companies are making a trade of sorts: If you’re not willing to come back into the office, we’re going to monitor your every move. I’ll be the first to admit: I’m not a work-from-home fan. I miss the spontaneous conversations and impromptu check-ins with employees. And I think young (and new) employees lose out on vital connections and mentoring opportunities. It’s hard to learn a company’s culture on a Zoom screen. But I understand the benefits of work from home, too. At the National Conflict Resolution Center, the pandemic years were our best ever, from a results per-

spective. Some of the reason for our success, I’m sure, is that employees felt trusted and empowered. Despite the many challenges of the pandemic, it seemed that all of us were rowing in the same direction. So, while tracking may provide insights into work habits, it can’t supplant a trusting relationship between employers and employees. If trust is a quaint notion too, we can’t be far away from a robotized workforce. It’s clear that employee surveillance isn’t going away. And with time, systems will get better. But companies have an obligation to disclose their practices and clarify their work-from-home expectations. We also need stronger protections of worker privacy. Our workplaces have changed forever. The needs and priorities of our workers have changed, too. It’s time to adapt.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC’s programming, visit ncronline.com

REFUGE • Expert: Libraries offer chance to access ‘otherwise hidden population’

FROM B1 On a recent afternoon, Reuben and his friend, James, sat in the courtyard outside the Central Library’s front entrance. Just yards away, a homeless man surrounded by plastic bags sat on the 11th Street steps next to a woman with a cart. Across the street, a man sat on the sidewalk, possibly asleep as he leaned against the wall of Global Knowledge University. On the other side of the library, a man sat on the sidewalk next to Park Boulevard, wearing a flannel shirt on a hot summer afternoon and staring blankly ahead. Nearby, two men were sprawled across the sidewalk while a tent provided shelter for another homeless person.



Supervising librarian Monnee Tong (left) and San Diego State professor Lianne Urada in front of a homeless outreach office at the Central Library downtown.

Inside the library, however, it’s not as easy to tell who is homeless among the patrons, although the many people with bags or backpacks next to their chairs can be a indication. Monnee Tong, supervising librarian at the Central Library and three branches in the city, said most homeless people at the library congregate on the second and third floors, where Tong estimates as many as 80 percent of patrons are homeless. She estimates about 200 people are usually at the library at any one time, and about 1,400 people visit on an average day, down from around 3,000 before the pandemic. Average daily attendance had remained steady at about 3,000 until its closure because of the pandemic in March 2020. Its drop in average daily attendance coincides with a significant cut in its operating hours following its reopening in October 2020. Before the pandemic, operating hours had been 9:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and noon to 6 p.m. Sundays. The current hours are 11:30 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Mondays and Tuesdays, and 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays. Tong is among the library staff members who assisted Lianne Urada, an associate professor of social work at SDSU, in her research into how libraries can address homelessness in their cities. “The public library presents a unique opportunity to access an otherwise hidden population,” Urada wrote in her paper recently published in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. Her paper includes interviews by student researchers with 14 library staff members and 49 homeless patrons. “I can just isolate myself,” a homeless man was quoted in her paper. “Grab a book or even a newspaper and just tune everyone else out, you know? I’m safe and don’t have to worry about getting robbed.” Another man said life in a shelter can be unstable, because he was constantly

moving from one to another, and visiting the library gave his life some stability. “See, it’s the lack of stability that’s killing me,” he said. “If I had something stable, I’d be fine.” Libraries as homeless service centers Interviews for Urada’s paper found 69 percent of library patrons and 93 percent of staff members supported an on-site social worker who could help with housing services, substance use treatments and other issues such as food insecurity, human trafficking and sexual exploitation. The idea isn’t unique. It follows a national trend of major cities recognizing the role libraries can play as a type of homeless services provider. Urada wrote in her paper that a growing number of libraries across the country are providing assistance to their homeless patrons, with have to Toronto and San Francisco even starting food banks during the pandemic. At least 31 other libraries in the country have added social

workers and other social services professionals to their teams, she wrote. San Francisco was the first library to hire a clinical social worker, and Urada wrote that more than 150 people found permanent housing and 800 received other services through the library, which also incorporated a peer support model that included two health and safety associates and formerly homeless patrons. The Public Library Association also has created a list of resources for libraries to provide for homeless patrons. The page includes links to articles about mental health training in public libraries, legal information, substance abuse help, outreach services and other related topics. In a 2019 interview with The San Diego Union-Tribune, Central Library director Jones said she had been inspired to examine how the library deals with its homeless patrons after hearing a presentation from Ryan Dowd, author of “The Librarian’s Guide to Homelessness.” The books emphasizes empathy when dealing with homeless patrons, with Dowd offering subtle tips such as having a “no snoring” rather than a “no sleeping policy.” He also offers tips on how to deal with patrons with mental issues and suggests ways of prohibiting panhandling in a non-threatening way. Library staff members in San Diego have taken Dowd’s online course on interacting with homeless patrons. The Central Library already has a Veterans Resource Center staffed by People Assisting the Homeless and another office staffed with an outreach worker from the National Alliance on Mental Illness, both on the third floor. In the fall semester, another office will be staffed by SDSU intern Maria Temporal, who is earning a master’s degree in social work. Urada said the student intern will provide another level of help for homeless people, as she is a trained mental health therapist who can do one-on-one counseling. “The library does have a homeless and mental health office,” Urada said. “What they need is to have some professional social worker who can really help with crisis management.” Temporal will be at the library three days a week in the fall under a city-funded program that Urada sees as a model for other libraries to follow. Besides working at the library, Tong said Temporal also will do outreach in East Village to let homeless people in the neighborhood know about services in the library. That outreach will also help library staff members stay informed about resources available at nearby homeless service providers, such as Father Joe’s Villages, Tong said. Another benefit of having a trained social worker on staff could be fewer disturbances, which sometimes are

handled with calls to police and Psychiatric Emergency Response Teams, Jones said. Rather than responding to incidents after they happen, Jones said a social worker who has come to know a homeless patron with mental or substance use issues may be able to calm the person before a situation escalates. “I think it’s about recognizing the behavior before it becomes a problem,” she said, adding that a social worker who gets to know homeless patrons may build a relationship that can have long-term results. “I think we’ve got a population that really wants help, which is why they come here,” Jones said. “And we want to do everything we can to help them.” Urada also recently received a two-year, \$275,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ National Institutes of Health to study the effectiveness of an on-site telecare system. Once it’s in place, library patrons can connect through telecare with Father Joe’s Villages medical clinic to prescribe buprenorphine, a drug used to treat opioid addiction. Outside the library on a recent afternoon, friends Reuben and James sat on a bench and talked about their frustrations with being homeless for years in downtown San Diego. James, however, was celebrating the news that after 20 years on the street, he was about to move into a housing unit with help from a local service providers. He still may frequent the library, however, which he said he often visits to kill time and read graphic novels. “I like Superman,” he said. “I’m a DC fan.” He described his time in the library in a spiritual way. “I come to get a daily understanding of God,” he said. “It’s peaceful.”

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CHORUS

FROM B1 erance,” explained Gheno, 36. In some ways, LGBT rights have grown stronger in Mexico, with discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation outlawed since 2003. Most of the country’s 32 states recognize gay marriage, including Baja California, and the nation’s top court has ruled that trans people have a legal right to change their gender identity on official documents. But the changes have been slow to come to the northern Mexican state of Baja California, where the Catholic religion is dominant and the right-leaning National Action Party, or PAN, has maintained some grip on the political landscape. Locally, the legal right for same-sex couples to marry in Baja California has only been codified in the state constitution for one year, since August 2021. Before that, same-sex couples had to obtain a court order to marry. It wasn’t until January that Baja California’s legislature passed a law that allows transgender adults to legally change their name and gender. In April, the state’s legislature voted 20-4 in favor of banning conversion therapy,

which aims to change a person’s sexual orientation. It is a practice that has been debunked; a 2007 task force convened by the American Psychological Association found no evidence it works. The bill would have levied fines and even jail time on anyone who practices it, as well as on parents who send their children to providers. But Baja California Gov. Marina del Pilar Ávila Olmeda drew the ire of the gay community by vetoing it. She opted instead to regulate conversion therapy providers by allowing parents to make the choice to send their children to them — as long as the child is not forced into going. Even though the LGBT rights movement has become stronger, broader and more visible across Mexico and in Baja California in recent years, advocates say there is still much work left to be done. In 2019, 117 lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people were killed in Mexico, up almost a third compared with 2018 and the highest number since 2015, according to the LGBT+ advocacy group Letra S. Francisco Madrid, a 36-year-old tenor who sings in the chorus, says the Tijuana Gay Men’s Chorus is aimed at music and art, but it is also helping overcome stigmas that are still prevalent in Tijuana about the gay community.



Vocal coach Israel Rodriguez (left) conducts a rehearsal of the Tijuana Gay Men’s Chorus at the Casa de la Cultura in Tijuana last month.

“Sometimes people think that we are just like running naked in the streets and going to parties every night and being crazy. But, we are actually very creative people and we are very talented people and we are showing that,” Madrid said, stepping aside during a recent vocal technique practice. “We are showing that music can remove the barriers between different ideologies.” The group practices a couple times a week, and some of its members incorporate dance into their performances. They are scheduled to have a concert on Oct. 9 in Mexicali, with the performance tentatively scheduled to take place at

the Central Library. Many see singing as more than a hobby. Madrid said he’s been going on auditions and singing and dancing at performances for 20 years. “It’s a passion. It’s something I want to do with my life,” he explained. At the recent Wednesday practice, the chorus warmed up with stretching and breath work. In one exercise, they each thought of a word in their head and then sang a note that they felt represented the word. At one point, the entire chorus seemed to blend their notes (and words) into one another, losing themselves briefly in the music. The group started in

March 2020, a week before the world shut down because of the coronavirus pandemic. “The choir surviving two years during the pandemic was a miracle,” said Gheno. Charles Beale, the acclaimed new director of the San Diego Gay Men’s Chorus, which was founded in 1985, credits Gheno’s leadership. “Edgar is a brave soul, an amazing educator and a pioneering leader, who has already done transforming work in building the Coro Gai TJ to where it is today, in a context which is not easy,” said Beale. Both Gheno and Beale, directing gay men’s cho-

uses 15 miles apart, recognize an opportunity for a possible cross-border collaboration. “This is a time where international collaborations between Mexico and the U.S. could not be more crucial. We need to heal divisions sown by those with a narrow view of the world, and show how so much good can be achieved when we work together with our fellow man,” said Beale. “What better way to do that than by singing, which always brings joy and builds bonds between people.” Gheno, Madrid and others in the chorus, said it feels uplifting to be doing something so positive at a time when most of the news out of the region is so dark. “That’s the power of music,” said Madrid. “I mean every time that I feel sad or down — actually I play the guitar when I am stressed out, and I feel better. I would say the truth is that Mexico is not the safest place in the world, but I think there are a lot of good activities that you can find in TJ and this is one of them.” Gheno added that idea is reflected in the group’s slogan: music, visibility and community, “because we also intend to create bonds or reinforce community ties through our music.”

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