

More on Work in the 21st Century: Amazon.com in the UK

In today's article, "Amazon Unpacked" by Sarah O'Connor (pp. 80-91 in the Course Pack), comes from the generally 'pro-business' *Financial Times* online (www.ft.com). Here we see another news feature portraying a specific place and the changing nature of work in the 21st century. The article describes how the town of Rugeley in the UK has 'benefited' from a new Amazon.com distribution center, which has created hundreds of new jobs at a huge new facility. The author allows us to see the difference between the rules of an older economy for workers and newer, 21st-century realities for service-sector employees. It will allow us to see once again how work (and manual work) has changed in recent times as this former coal-mining town has transitioned to become a hub for one of the most profitable and successful companies in the world, Amazon.com.

● In groups of 3:

1) Describe the work life of workers at this Amazon.com warehouse. Does it seem like a good job or not?

2) What is the history of Rugeley as a town? What kinds of jobs did people before 1990? **Were there advantages to working as a coal miner versus working in the new Amazon.com warehouse? Which was a better job? Why?**

3) **On p. 84, the author writes that the transition to the new way of working at the Amazon.com warehouse has been a 'culture shock' (O'Connor 84). What does this phrase mean to you?** What's different about the nature of work in the 21st century as typified by the management and work style demanded at the Amazon.com center versus the coal mines?

4) **Next, choose one of the photos in the article to look at.** What does this photo tell you about work? What does it add to the written story? On p. 89, you might look at the contrasting photos of workers from different eras in Rugeley. (We have been looking at similar historical photos of Queens workers from the past.) **What does this photo tell you about the changing nature of work in the 21st century?**

5) **Challenge Question: Is there an argument in the last part of the article about why the new service-sector jobs in Rugeley may be not as well-paid or secure as the**

manual-labor jobs of the past? Does O'Connor speculate on the reasons why Amazon.com doesn't pay its workers very much or offer them much job security? **On balance, does the author seem to side with Amazon.com or the workers?** Does this surprise you? (Also, does your team feel sympathy for one side or another?) **Also, combined with the article on iPad factories in China, can you generalize on the changing nature of repetitive or manual labor in the 21st century?** Judging from our readings so far, what can you say about 'new jobs' at two highly successful companies (Apple and Amazon.com)?

(~25 min.)

- Once again, choose a reporter who will give your responses to the class. We will collect some answers to the above questions.