Chapter 18 - Markets and occupations

Answers to end of chapter questions

1. Why is the notion of ‘choice’ in labour markets so problematic?

A key factor in labour-market behaviour is the notion of choice. However, concepts of ‘freedom’ and ‘choice’ are highly problematic. How much choice is real choice? And what apparent choices really represent the individual bowing to the inevitable? The concept of choice also obscures conflicting interests and power differences in society—choice for a powerful group may well appear as constraint to the less well placed. Thus any understanding of the way the labour market mediates the relationship between employers and employees must dig deeper than a face-value notion of individual choice. It has to take serious account of the structural forces (class, gender, race) that influence the opportunities open to people, and which shape the images of their own chances that they develop.

2. Explain the concepts of the dual labour market and the internal labour market.

The dual labour market - a major ‘imperfection’ in the market for labour to which economists and sociologists have drawn attention lies in the fact that it is not unified. In reality it is divided into distinct segments, and in particular into a primary and a secondary labour market. Jobs in the primary market are supplied by large firms that are technologically advanced and profitable. Wages and working conditions are relatively good, levels of unionization tend to be high, and employers are concerned with retaining stable workforces. However, this applies only to part of the economy. In addition, there are jobs in the secondary sector provided by small firms, usually in low technology industries and very competitive markets. Such firms normally experience great pressures to exploit their workers to the utmost, so wages tend to be low and conditions poor.

3. What are the factors that have shaped the emergence of the ranks of lower-grade white-collar work?

The lower ranks of white-collar and service workers are to be distinguished from managerial and higher professional employees, who comprise the ‘new’ middle class. The latter have also been dubbed the ‘service class’, reflecting their responsibility for discharging functions, critical in a modern economy, of planning, administration and the control of labour.

4. Many of the new service workplaces are referred as the ‘white-collar factory’. What aspects of the new service work would warrant such a description?

Lower pay, less autonomy and shift work.
5. **Outline the main characteristics of professional occupations.**

The term itself tends to be more meaningful than any general category of white-collar work since even low-ranking groups in the professions seem to enjoy prospects and conditions of employment that differentiate them from routine white-collar workers. Professional groups tend to have distinctive and integrated occupational cultures. Professionals have a common sense of identity and values, share a consensus as regards their social role, speak a common language, and tend to be lifetime members of their occupation. Professions traditionally have enjoyed the high status and material rewards associated with positions of authority, yet they are also involved in the concrete process of work. Sometimes this may in fact be manual work (a surgeon, for example, carries out what is probably quite hard manual work, albeit delicate and skilled); and although most professions are white-collar in nature, there remains a belief that professionals should actually perform the work themselves and not merely delegate it to others. In this sense, while we might be tempted to lump together ‘managerial and professional’ work, we can see that the professions are in some ways quite distinct.

6. **The professions are often jokingly called ‘the best trade unions’. Why?**

The professional ethic resembles a sort of occupational ideology uniting the members of the profession. For example, a practitioner threatened with legal action for alleged incompetence can normally expect his colleagues to close ranks behind him, providing he has not broken the code of ethics. Thus, members of the public often find it extremely difficult to bring a case against professionals unless some gross breach of conduct can clearly be proven. Internal discipline within professions tends to be overwhelmingly concerned with cases where the profession itself might have been brought into disrepute (mostly involving illegal or immoral behaviour) rather than with investigating cases of incompetence on behalf of clients or the public.

7. **The professions are (less jokingly) referred to as a conspiracy against the public. Why?**

Because the interests of the professions have often come before the interests of those it is serving.

8. **Why is the world of the knowledge worker a potentially uncertain one?**

Knowledge workers derive great kudos from being associated with modernizing trends and new technologies, but they are constantly being market-tested for the relevance of their skills and the organizational problems they claim to be able to solve (the distinctly marginal status of a group like consultants springs to mind here). In this sense, knowledge workers represent the culmination of a long haul, from the last century when the certainties of property secured your place in society, through the still relative security of employment and professional practice, to the post-modern world and reliance on the possession of market-relevant skills.