Work is the best and worst thing we do. Work is a great source of satisfaction and growth and a central cause of distress in people’s lives. While the traditionally good things that happen in the workplace are shrinking, participation in the economy is still the best means to escape poverty. Our conviction concerning the significance of work and the workplace is so strong that we, the authors, have devoted our professional lives as social work educators, researchers, and scholars to the pursuit of delineating and clarifying the role of the world of work in the social welfare arena and understanding what work means to different populations and in different settings. In this pursuit we have been fortunate to work as intellectual partners for more than three decades. Often we have been inspired and educated by our colleagues and by our students who have used the knowledge and skill we have tried to impart to develop creative responses to the scene in which they find themselves.

This book represents our attempt to share with the social work community our sense of how occupational social work came to be what it is and what we think are the opportunities for the future. In a sense, this volume is the last of a trilogy. The first book we worked on together was titled Work, Workers, and Work Organizations: A View from Social Work, an edited volume in which expert scholars in each dimension of the social work curriculum undertook to look at their areas of specialization through the lens of the world of work and work as a human activity. In its various chapters it supported teaching in research, social policy, human behavior, social administration, community organizing, clinical practice, and of course, specialization in social work in the workplace as a field of practice. Our second volume, Work and Well-Being: The Occupational Social Work Advantage, another volume that we organized and edited, and to which we served as major contributors, represented a collection of
practice, policy, and research experience in which scholars and practitioners reviewed the experience of using the varied methods of social work practice—clinical, advanced generalist, program development and planning, community organizing, policy, and research—to evolve policies and programs that deal with major problems faced by the profession both in the world of work and in the community as it involves the world of work. In this third book we have taken on the authorship ourselves and have traced the origins, present practice, and future opportunities in social work in the workplace as we have experienced it and as others view it.

Our publications, of course, are not the only writing on this field of practice, although discussion of work and work issues historically has been absent from the social work literature. Work was not a central focus for Mary Richmond in *Social Diagnosis* (1917) or Gordon Hamilton in *The Theory and Practice of Social Casework* (1940), arguably the two most influential social work textbooks in the formative years of the profession. Moreover, with but two exceptions (Reynolds 1975; Weiner, Akabas, & Sommer 1973), no books had been published on occupational social work prior to 1980. The fifteenth edition of the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (1965) made no general reference to labor or management programs. Skeels’s (1965) entry in that edition titled “Social Welfare Programs of Labor and Industry” did not mention occupational social work or any of the programs and services under labor and industrial auspices that are common today. In that same year, Wilensky and Lebeaux (1965: 163) could correctly note that “[i]ndustrial [occupational] social work in the European tradition of social workers offering family and other services from outposts in the plant . . . hailed for the past twenty years as a ‘new frontier in social work,’ simply has not materialized in America.”

Social work textbooks, emerging in the 1950s upon Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accreditation of master’s degree (MSW) programs and expanding after 1974 with the accrediting of baccalaureate (BSW) programs, did not even list occupational social work as a field of practice. The 1980s was a decade of change. Starting with the publication of three landmark books in 1982 (Akabas & Kurzman 1982; Feinstein & Brown 1982; Masi 1982), the literature expanded, with four additional books on occupational social work being published during the decade (Googins & Godfrey 1987; Gould & Smith 1988; McGowan 1984; Thomlison 1983). Additionally, virtually every one of the prominent social work textbooks (widely used in the 165 accredited MSW and 450 accredited BSW programs that now exist) began to feature significant content on “occupational social work,” “employee assistance programs,” or “social work in the workplace.”
This book, in many ways, is the culmination of those efforts. It is presented in nine chapters, which in turn are divided into sections. While serving as a text for the teaching of occupational social work, this book also is intended to be useful in teaching across the curriculum in baccalaureate and master’s degree programs. As suggested by its title, Work and the Workplace, it should be helpful in the second context because of its focus on the universality of work and on the significance of the workplace in the lives of all clients whom we serve in every setting for social work practice. It also will support occupational social work concentrations (specializations) in the advanced curriculum that prepare graduates for roles in benefits management, human resource planning, occupational alcoholism and substance abuse services, preretirement preparation, corporate social responsibility, disability management, work-family program development, affirmative action, and employee assistance.

The initial chapter introduces the reader to the themes of the book and the rationale for its publication. With a historic perspective, it looks at the evolution of the field of practice (one of the few new fields to develop in the profession in the last fifty years), as well as at social work’s increased interest in recent years in work, workers, and work organizations. Providing boundaries and definitions for central concepts and terms, the chapter attempts to lay out the conceptual framework that will be used throughout and the importance of work, community, and family in this regard.

In chapter 2 we observe the differential meaning of work in people’s lives and how this understanding may shed light on contemporary work issues. In describing the economic, social, and psychological conditions extant in the world of work in the United States, we look at how different they may be for particular cohorts of Americans, both in reality and in perception. The “domino impact” of unemployment, for example, on individuals, families, organizations, and communities is cited, along with the inadequacy of the insurances, benefits, and support systems that are intended to respond to personal and systemic crises.

Chapter 3 places these current policy and practice issues in historical context, with an emphasis on the rapidity of change in the closing quarter of the twentieth century and now in the new millennium. Is work an opportunity or an obligation, and from a political perspective, is it a promise made or a promise broken? Using available government and non-government data, information is presented that sheds light on the quandaries that workers and work organizations face today; this chapter also reviews the ever-changing role and responsibility of the federal government since the advent of the New Deal in the 1930s.

Building on this policy foundation, the chapter that follows illuminates
the corresponding practice issues, in both occupational and traditional social work settings. In comparing practice between the two, the narrative in chapter 4 underscores the importance of a “work viewpoint” for a full appreciation of the significance of practice issues, such as service location, confidentiality, and competing values. Examples from practice at work sites illustrate the similarities and differences in assessment when one chooses to look through a “work lens” at presenting problems that clients (individual and organizational) bring to the social work practitioner. Inherent tensions are discussed, especially in the light of new practice issues, such as the trends toward privatization and managed care.

Chapter 5 discusses the distinct presenting problems that are characteristic of world of work settings. With an equal focus on causes and potential solutions, the chapter looks at the barriers to entry into the work world for many and the risks as well as rewards inherent in participation. The built-in potential for conflict between work and family obligations, the disadvantaged position of some classes of workers and work entrants, the unsupportive (even risk-producing) nature of many jobs and settings, and work implications for people with chronic or acute illnesses each receive attention.

Chapter 6 identifies the models of service delivery extant in the world of work and those targeted at workers and their families from without. Building on an understanding of the occupational social welfare system (chap. 1), the resources uniquely available within this system are cited to illuminate what labor- and management-sponsored social work programs can achieve. Focusing on organizational and individual change, community-based as well as private practice, we outline the interconnection between resources and service delivery systems, and the gaps that persist between them. Illustrated by workplace case examples, successful interventions are presented not only to show service delivery systems in action but also to provide a model that is available for replication.

Using disability as a metaphor, chapter 7 provides case histories that illustrate the great potential inherent in a collaboration of management, labor, social work, and government. Viewing disability simultaneously as an entitlement, manpower, and income-maintenance issue in the social policy realm, the variable becomes a useful template for analysis. Linking policy with program development and advocacy and case finding to direct service opportunities, the chapter underscores how a problem-solving focus and generalist practice perspective can have an impact on the rights and needs of people with disabilities in the world of work.

Since social workers also work (and are the only professionals with “work” in their title), chapter 8 looks at social workers as workers and
social agencies as employers. Dealing with most of the same issues as other work sites and workforce participants, employer and employee are conditioned by their mutual commitment to the clients they serve. Issues of productivity, accountability, mobility, and unionization are presented, all framed in part as a reflection of subdominant societal values. Given the reality of relatively low status and a meager array of tangible rewards, the dilemmas of social work employees and employers may be symbiotically intertwined. With the culture of the social agency as a significant intervening variable, some of these problems are resolved in the crucible of a common social ideology and commitment, but often these issues can and do lead to worker burnout or agency goal displacement. Funding sources, professional regulation, and a common code of ethics, however, provide an important mediating function.

Chapter 9 takes a look at the future. Given the achievements and discoveries to date, we try to assess current trends and future potential. Career counseling, manpower programming, and managed-care responsibility, for example, may evolve into important arenas for practice, along with some new alliances with a reinvigorated union movement. Creative methods of social research and new sources for social bookkeeping also may emerge that will strengthen the quality of our evaluation and thereby our capacity for program innovation and accountability. Lessons from the world of work that influence the social work profession in general are noted along with the reciprocal impact of economic and social change in the broader society on the workplace and on work site programs.

As we often tell our students when they are selecting a specialized field of practice, if they are eager to work with children, the elderly, kids in school, individuals facing urban crises, families with health problems, there is a field of practice to meet the specific needs of each of these populations and problems. But if they want it all, and to operate from a strengths perspective, promoting social justice for all, then the world of work is for them because each of those groups and concepts can be served by expertise in the area of work. Children prepare for work; adults struggle with work; the aged reminisce about work; where and how families live and grow is determined by work; and our social policy is directed at getting people to work. Therefore we need social workers to help all those people and policies deal realistically and humanely with work or its absence. Entering work, remaining at work, and leaving work are some of the main passages of life for most of us and being able to find meaningful, rewarding work is the greatest challenge facing individuals and society today. It’s the economy, stupid! was the motto of the first Clinton campaign—and it will serve equally for the first presidential campaign of
the twenty-first century because, as Camus said, “without work all life goes rotten.”

Studying and working in the world of work as a field of practice is about population, sponsoring auspices, legislation, particular presenting problems, and field-related solution sets. This means it is about workers and their dependents (which includes just about everyone); about labor and management and government and their interlocking approaches to work issues; about the Social Security Act and the Immigration Reform and Control Act; about the Ticket to Work, Work Incentives Improvement Act, and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act; about confronting and solving problems of affirmative action and sexual harassment; about finding jobs and helping sustain employment for those disadvantaged by lack of training, immigrant status, or labor market discrimination because of mental health conditions, ethnic group membership, or a history of incarceration or domestic violence. It is also about family/work life balance, child care, elder care, unemployment, and underemployment—about taking on the world and making it a better place for people through the most universal of all activities, WORK. It is about all the reasons anyone becomes a social worker.

As a field of practice, social work in the workplace requires the best of clinical skills to make speedy and accurate assessments and to help people function in all arenas of their lives. It demands good program-planning skills to identify and implement responsive programs; research skills to document needs and use the information as a basis for policy formulation, facilitation, negotiation, and advocacy; ability to take the information and direct attention to the significance of the issues in people’s lives—in short, every skill that is required to function effectively as a social worker. But most important, the field, relatively unchartered, calls on the professional to organize creative capacities and go outside the box to find new ways of working in the twenty-first century. If one sees oneself as an activist social worker interested in evidence-based practice, an empowerment model, and strengths perspective, then this is an enticing field of practice. Finally we should speak to jobs—since that is really what many readers are preparing for. The field offers a variety of employment opportunities in traditional social work settings where doing good clinical or generalist work from a workplace vantage is valued but also in specific spots in EAPs (employee assistance programs) and MAPs (member assistance programs) and in human resource departments and planning agencies.

The accomplishments of occupational social workers provide vivid examples of what the profession can do when located at the vortex. Like settlement house or residential treatment workers living in the community...
they serve, such practitioners become a part of the work organization rather than being external to it. Equally, we argue, the great majority of social work practitioners in traditional public and voluntary settings cannot fully understand their clients unless they appreciate the implications of the presence (or absence) of work as a variable in their clients’ lives—and in the lives of family members. Whether viewed as a primary text for specialization in the advanced curriculum or as a supplementary reference for courses in the foundation year, Work and the Workplace should fill a current gap in the literature. Adhering to the CSWE Commission on Educational Policy’s emphases and expectations, this book looks at direct and indirect practice, values and ethics, and issues of oppression and of social justice. We hope the reader will conclude that this book is able to make a contribution to the Columbia University Press series Foundations of Social Work Knowledge and to the larger organized profession represented by its policy-setting national organizations, its schools, and ultimately, by its practitioners in the field.

Sheila H. Akabas
Paul A. Kurzman