Bait and switch

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There is an interesting book by Barbara Ehrenreich. It’s called Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream. Published in 2006, it’s pertinent to the condition of the engineering profession in the U.S. today.

What is the American Dream? Contrary to detractors of the U.S., it isn't the idea of getting something for nothing, or getting a free ride. It started out as the idea of simply working hard, saving money, and then getting to benefit from the results.

This was a revolutionary idea, when you compare it to what had been happening in prior or in other societies, where someone would work hard--say as a serf, servant, or slave--and not get to keep a sufficient amount of the results of the labor to improve one's condition. But early, pre-industrial America held out the promise of freedom, at least in theory, so that individuals could work to improve themselves, and benefit from their own labor without interference.

This proposition faded quite a bit for employees in newly created factories during the Industrial Revolution in the early 1800s. For the most part, they worked through hand-to-mouth existences in debilitating conditions. Nobility didn't seem to have much place in those surroundings, as documented in books such as A Sweatshop During the Industrial Revolution by Adam Woog.

While standards of living should have improved more rapidly as goods came to be produced more efficiently, it wasn't until the labor movement reached full swing, after many bloody encounters, that employees got to keep a larger share of the results of their hard work, and the leisure time to enjoy it. The American Dream then began to transform, for the first time, from a dream into an institutionalized reality, reaching a peak during the 1950's.

What happened to the idea that, by working hard, you could not only beat back hunger and poverty, but actually put something away for a rainy day? You may recall that, just a short time ago, rampant overwork and declining leisure was the subject of headlines. Books like The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline Of Leisure by Juliet Schor chronicled the surprising conclusion that hard work was not creating more leisure, but less! According to Schor, in the 1990's, we worked harder than we had 40 years earlier, and we were on track to shortly regress to the same work schedules we had in the 1920's.

Our reward for all that hard work? It was huge unemployment, which, by the way, is likely at near-Depression levels, but is not being reported that way because those unemployed who have exhausted their benefits are no longer being officially counted. In fact, once they do exhaust their benefits, they are booted off the rolls, resulting in crazy numbers that on the one hand show hardly any new jobs created, but on the other hand show the unemployment rate getting better and better.

The question for the Noble Profession is now, is the profession itself viable? That is, is it now too
much of an expectation that studying hard to get an engineering degree, then working exceptionally hard for an employer, will result in a stable lifestyle that includes food and shelter into one's retirement? Hard to believe that such questions can be legitimately asked concerning engineering, but the facts seem to show that the old promise of hard work leading to security is not resulting in even the minimum long-term rewards. In other words, has the Noble Profession fallen to, and essentially become, a bait and switch scam?

Ehrenreich writes, on pages 232 to 233 of *Bait and Switch*, “Other white-collar occupational groups—doctors, lawyers, teachers, and college professors—have done better at carving out some autonomy and security for themselves. Their principal strategy, undertaken in the early twentieth century, was professionalization: the erection of steep barriers to the occupation, backed up by the force of law and the power of professional organizations like the AMA.” But for technological careers, or really any white collar job nowadays, it is different. She writes, on page 235, “As it is, the IT person who is required to train her Indian replacement—a not uncommon indignity—might as well be digging her own grave.”