

It's not just blue or white collar anymore as consultants labels for new jobs to the palette

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By Anya Sostek, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Life used to be just blue and white, at least when it came to collars.

Blue collar referred to manual laborers and the shirts they wore that masked some of the dirty work. Pristine white collars were the hallmark of the bosses and executives, who didn't need to worry about soiling their shirts.

But today's increasingly diverse work force has sparked academics and researchers to come up with a rainbow of collars to describe them.

"The traditional notion of white collar and blue collar just doesn't really capture the flavor of all these different workers," said Jerry Paytas, director of research at GSP Consulting in the South Side. "You have people in these fields who run a real complete range of income and types of work."

The latest classification, "green collar," refers to workers in environmentally friendly fields. Think of a park ranger or Sierra Club organizer.

"People are constantly coming up with new ones," said Mr. Paytas.

Sometimes, however, the descriptions can get a little fuzzy. A "gold collar" worker, for example, can mean several different things.

Mr. Paytas is familiar with gold collar workers as those at the absolute top of the pay scale: doctors, lawyers, investment bankers, etc. In a 1985 book, "The Gold Collar Worker," Carnegie Mellon professor Robert Kelley used the term to describe workers with high intelligence who might not like to follow traditional corporate rules.

More recently, gold collar has been used to refer to jobs that require skilled labor, but not



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necessarily a bachelor's degree. Examples include a computer support specialist or an architectural drafter.

However, the term also has been used in a derogatory way to refer to workers without college degrees who choose to spend their disposable income on designer clothes and luxury cars. As former newspaper columnist Joanne Jacobs put it, " 'Gold collar' young adults have Ketel One vodka tastes on a beer budget."

The term "pink collar" also often is used in a negative sense, referring to jobs sometimes thought of as "dead-end" and traditionally done by women -- encompassing everything from nurses to waitresses. A 1977 book, "Pink Collar Workers: Inside the World of Women's Work," was nominated for a National Book Award and argued that women were trapped in fields that would always be lower-paying than equivalent jobs for men.

The least defined term of all seems to be gray collar, which can refer to those working well into their 60s, because they can't afford to retire, or to an underemployed white collar worker, such as someone with a bachelor's degree in English literature working as an customer service representative.

Because of all the disparate definitions, the question, "What color is your collar" can be a tricky one to answer. A legal secretary, for example, could be classified as white, pink, gold or gray collar.

While all of the competing colors may be confusing, or even goofy at times, they do seem to reflect a certain murkiness about workplace roles.

"It's this convergence of what we traditionally thought of as separate skill sets," said Ron Painter, chief executive officer of the Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board, a nonprofit advocate of work force development.

For example, even a traditional blue collar worker such as a mechanic now has to have computer and electronic skills to do the job.

"We expect people to understand not just what they do, but why they do it," said Mr. Painter.

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