Attitudes toward work and productivity

Europe provides world leadership in productivity. That at least seems to be the conclusion from hourly figures: Belgium, France, Ireland, and the Netherlands all outperform the USA when productivity is measured in terms of value added per hour worked. Yet on the broader basis of output per worker, the USA is still the world leader.

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This discrepancy—if that is the correct word since Europe enjoys more leisure—has brought about a number of discussions on alternative policy options in Europe. For Europe is confronted with the increasing problem of fewer working-age people having to pay for the income of a continuously growing body of unproductive pensioners. Although it is certainly no cause for complacency, rising labor productivity can ensure that the declining workforce produces ever more goods and services. This is thanks on the one hand to the continuing application of Taylor's approach to ordering work by breaking down tasks into individually timed actions—now steadfastly applied in the bulk of unskilled brawn (and indeed brain) jobs that Europe has grown of late: health careers, security services, seasonal agricultural workers, delivery services, and call centers, among others.

On the other, "globalization" means that Europeans can benefit from the far lower labor costs in Asia to outsource an increasing number of manufactured items (notably to China) and information technologies (notably to India). Skilled foreign workers can be brought in to fill shortages in jobs where the welfare state can, because of pay scales, only with difficulty attract locals. It would seem that continental Europe's unemployed, with their relatively high state benefits, are mentally and physically unable to fill vacancies for monotonous jobs, although migrants evidently can.

Not that everyone is happy with these approaches: unions decry Taylorism's "one best solution" as well as exporting jobs and the maintenance of "indecently low" pay scales, particularly in the public sector. Yet the jobs in question are often monotonous, back-breaking, or brain-numbing—the very jobs that European governments have been striving to reform over the last three decades.

This is but one manifestation of how the welfare state, in its various manifestations, has given rise to changing attitudes toward work which have depressed productivity increases. Job security and rigid employment conditions can mean that a jobholder can only be fired at considerable cost to the enterprise and/or the state. Yet structural change is always necessary for enhancing productivity. When it is artificially dampened in a market economy, the outcome in the end is all the more brutal.

Two other changing attitudes toward work are also impacting on workplace productivity: the "work/family balance" and "stress." As more women have joined the workforce they have demanded more rights for leave for their nurturing duties and their continuous learning requirements. To counteract the downsides, various forms of flexible "work organization" have emerged as a means of productivity enhancement. For the way we work and the time we work do not have to be the same for everyone all the time.

Perhaps the most significant aspect, which is prominent in Scandinavia, is for all those involved in a specific workplace to collaborate with their colleagues to redesign it continuously in the light of the changing requirements of their customers. To this end, companies strive to have their workforces understand who their customers, internal or external, are and remain in continuous contact with them. This stance gives new meaning to training and learning: no longer are they useful adjuncts to working life but essential elements for continuously raising its satisfaction and productivity.

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A second element to improve the match between a workforce and its customers is to implement more flexible working time, weekly, monthly, and annually. In August 2003 France experienced the deadly result of government fiat rigidly reducing the working week to 35 hours for all, including the medical profession: some 14,000 old persons died in a heat wave largely because the medics, having accumulated overtime, had had to take their vacations in August. In neighboring countries with similar climatic conditions but no such laws, no such tragedies occurred. Other recent productivity-poignant aspects of greater flexibility in working time to meet consumer demand better include Germany's shop opening hours for evenings and Saturdays, although not yet Sundays. And for a growing number of jobs, distance working is becoming ever more feasible. Distance working could be particularly important in light of a growing barrier to productivity: the prevalence of stress.

In 2002 the UK lost 33 million working days due to occupational disease, of which stress is the biggest cause. This was more than 60 times the number of days lost through strikes. The incidence of stress has trebled since 1996 and the number of

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days lost has doubled. Other countries in the EU note similar phenomena.

Such figures suggest that the workplace has become twice as demanding in less than a decade. But perhaps more employees are finding "stress" a convenient label to justify taking time off work. Even the rise of stress awareness programs might be exaggerating the scale of the problem by encouraging over-reporting—an indication of which could be that the highest levels of stress are found in the public sector. However, private companies are taking stress seriously as an obstacle to productivity by increasingly not only training their managers in how to tackle it and providing structured assistance but also using workplace development approaches, especially greater worker autonomy, as a powerful means of coping.

All this is happening in the centennial year of Taylor's unveiling of what Peter Drucker termed "the most powerful as well as the most lasting contribution America has made to Western thought": productivity science. Clearly, Taylor's basic "one best solution" is still widely used in less-skilled jobs, but for an "information economy," which Europe strives to be, its future application is limited.

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