

# Post-fordist era essay



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Henry Ford founded the Ford Motor Company in 1903 during a period of time in the USA of rapid industrialisation. It was within these years (1880-1910) that large organisations were produced, and Henry Ford's motor company was one of them.

In 1908 the company initiated the production of the Model-T, of which the company sold 15million, it was the first car of its kind to built using a new type of production, Fordism. – Fordism is a form of industrial production that was born developed from F. W. Taylor's scientific management methods where the main aim is, as Abernathy (1978) wrote “ product maximisation through tight control over the employee's every task movements. ” Fordism pioneered mass production by fragmenting and simplifying work tasks for employees. It incorporated the use of a: “ moving assembly line that controls the pace of the work.

Under this system, workers performed repetitive assembly tasks which require little training or skill. The parts are designed so that they can be developed easily. Machines are used to produce standardized parts for products which are mass-produced. Products tend to be relatively cheap.

Labour costs are held down because there is little need to employ skilled labour, and because of the large number of products produced, overheads and capital costs, such as the cost of machinery are relatively low. ”

(Haralambos and Holborn 2000; pg. 713) Fordism also experiences an autocratic style of management, a strict division of labour and little empowerment/decision making for employees. Although work was secure for the majority, workers felt ‘ alienated.

‘ With this revolutionary style of production, Fordism heavily influenced the improvement of developed countries economies during the mid twentieth century, particularly in the 1940’s to the mid 1960’s. Under Fordism, mass utilization shared with mass production to create continued economic growth and extensive material advancement. However, problems with this form of regime emerged during the 1960s and early 1970s. Workers became less productive and efficient causing a drop in quality levels as they became angry and bored with the style of work Bradley et al (2000) mentions that working conditions of Fordism led to worker disaffection with adverse consequence for quality control and the alienated, deskilled and bored workers commonly adopted a hostile stance towards their employers.

Profit for companies decreased as workers high wages did not match the productivity levels. Companies also found it harder to sell their products as consumers wanted more choices in goods and services which mass production or Fordism could not offer them. The demise of the Fordism was brought about further by Globalisation and rapid advancement in technology. Michael J.

Piore (1986) is amongst those who believe that Fordist is an obsolete view and that capitalist countries have entered a ‘ post-fordist’ era. He claims that much work is now organised according to the principles of ‘ flexible specialisation. ‘ (Haralambos and Holborn, 2000; pg. 13) Post-Fordism is flexible in its methods so it can respond appropriately to sudden increases in consumer demand by quickly increasing supply to meet it. Computer technology is relied upon heavily as mass demand diversification requires rapid design and production processes; computation allows this. This is

especially important in contemporary western markets, which are characterised by unpredictable consumer product preferences.

Clothing company Benetton, for example, highlighted by Sabel (1982) is an example of this; it varies products frequently and uses different suppliers to compete in fashion markets. Haralambos and Holborn 2000: pg. 714) Piore believes that these developments have resulted in changes in patterns of work and management, and subsequently, with increasing flexibility required, a flexible and skilled workforce is necessary. He says: “ these developments seem to be producing an employment structure in which low-skilled repetitive tasks are reduced, eliminating semi-skilled jobs.

.. highly skilled work...

remains, albeit often in a new form more closely linked to the computer. ” (Haralambos and Holborn; pg. 14) Piore identifies Japanese principles of flexible specialisation as occurring in all capitalist economies. The Japanese Just-In-Time (JIT) production method allows companies to gain supplies just before its intended use, hence flexibility to the economic conditions of demand.

Workers who perform under these methods, have to be broadly trained, as work becomes ever more diverse. This long training and increased job empowerment consequently improves worker morale and heightens job security. The view that industry has now become post-Fordist is supported by Savage, Barlow, Dickens & Fielding (1992) whereby firms are less hierarchical and produce small batches of specialised commodities.

(Haralambos and Holborn: pg. 73), as opposed to Fordist massively produced

standardized products, where Hegemony occurs; the workforce is subordinated to the machine's pace.

Atkinson (1985) focused on Post-fordist firms, identifying that core and periphery workers are vital to their flexibility. Factors such as recessions, less trade union sovereignty, reduced working week and technology encouraged this flexibility (Haralambos and Holborn, 2000: pg. 714). The core group are managers, designers, skilled workers who's jobs are relatively secure whilst the periphery group are less secure and closer controlled but may be full-time such as clerical and supervisory who have common labour skills so can be flexibly recruited.

Likewise can the increasing proportion in labour markets of part-time, temporary and agency workers. Atkinson however does not go as far Piore in believing that the trend towards flexibility increases the skills and the autonomy of the workforce. Core workers certainly benefit from 'the flexible firm.' They learn a large selection of skills, and management allows participation by these workers in decision-making processes; all of which enlarge their functional flexibility. (Haralambos and Holborn, 2000; pg.

714) Conversely, the peripheral workers are less likely to enjoy such job satisfaction within a company. Their skills would not require broadening, and decision-making would be anonymous from their routine. Their work, due to the nature of their contracts – short-term – or the number of hours they would do, would require a more autocratic style of management which workers would find it, as Piore and Atkinson agree, similar to that of the Fordist era, and all things considered, demoralising. Whereas Fordism has

large, hierarchical, bureaucratic plants with semi-skilled labour and little creativity, the need for trade unions and collective bargaining. Whilst in Post-Fordism, flat and leaner structures are present, (Jessop 1991; pg. 4) and the flexible conditions allow various innovations by skilled/professional workers.

Continuous innovation from Post-Fordism is required to satisfy increasingly diverse consumer demands. Some corporations will target niches; others will produce a diverse product range. Hypermarkets and shopping centres are viewed as Post-fordist (Jessop 1991; pg. 15). Nevertheless, the widely held belief amongst sociologists that work is becoming less satisfying and less skilled. For example, Anna Pollert (1988) strongly criticises the views of Piore and Atkinson.

Pollert argues that the theory of flexibility “ conflates and obscures contradictory processes within the organisation of work. ” (Haralambos and Holborn, 2000; pg. 715). Pollert believes the theories have been over-simplified. Firstly the over-stating of the dominance of Fordist production methods, where small-batch production has been of great significance throughout the twentieth century, and flexible companies with the ability to produce specialised products for a demand-led market are nothing novel. Secondly, Pollert points out that there has not been a marked reduction in the value of mass production.

Haralambos and Holborn, 2000; pg. 715) She points out a whole range of industries that use mass production that continue to sell well to large markets for example: “ food, drinks, toiletries, records and toys. ” Pollert also attacks the view that flexibility in the workforce has resulted in the

requirement of more skills. She says, “ more flexible production may lead to continuing dependence on traditional skills, deskilling, skill increases and skill polarisation.

” Stephen Wood (1989) bolsters the argument with a study of two British steel-rolling mills. He found that the purchase of new machinery did not improve the skills of the workers, just the output of steel. He argues that many of the workers in highly skilled jobs were already at that level of skill and did not acquire enhanced skill during their time at their job. Wood says, “ flexibility for workers means little more than having to move between semi-skilled jobs that require very little training.

” Anna Pollert also states that during a period of change conflict at work may well occur due to management/subordinate disagreement. Pollert says that there has been a fluctuation of the ‘ peripheral workforce’ and not an increase if Atkinson was correct about the move towards “ numerical flexibility. ” (Haralambos and Holborn, 2000; pg. 716) The post-Fordist era also, according to Wood, has had many negative consequences on the British Workforce. In the Fordist period, for example, unskilled assembly workers eventually reaped substantial gains from increased industrial productivity; a forty percent reduction in working hours and a twenty-five-fold increase in wages.

Unions enforced artificial scarcity to win supra-competitive wages for their members. Coordinated wage setting between national associations of employers and national labour organisations, usually led by blue-collar unions, achieved both high wages and considerable income equality, almost

without strikes (Scharph, 1991). However in modern day society changes had led to, “ job losses, unemployment, tightening of performance standards, labour intensification, changing employment contracts and reduction of the power of trade unions and workers’ representatives. ’ (Haralambos and Holborn, 2000; pg. 716) Paul Thompson argues that the “ extent and novelty” of flexibility has been “ grossly over exaggerated. He believes that modern workers do need more flexibility, but not because of reskilling, therefore more empowerment and motivation; but simply job rotation in the form of multi-tasking has transpired.

He claims it is typical of a fast-food outlet such as McDonalds: “ Workers are expected to perform a variety of tasks involved in preparing and selling food, but there is little skill involved and no opportunity for workers to use their initiative. Detailed rules are followed to tell them how to do their jobs. ”

(Haralambos and Holborn, 2000; pg. 16) Thompson concedes that some of the old Fordist methods of controlling and monitoring the workforce have been relaxed, such as Ford wished to transfer control from the workers to management and he achieved this, by creating an authoritarian management system overseeing supervision and machine-led repetitive tasks. The threat of an increasing labour turnover rate lead him to slashing the hours worked per day and doubling the wage rate to \$5.

00 per day. Although this placed Ford in favourable light, a further motive was so that workers could afford to purchase his cars. He also believed the deskilling of car production was required to achieve ‘ continuous improvement’ and mass production. Whilst other observers argue Ford had



the motive for the ease of controlling labour and substituting it should it be uncontrollable.

The skilled mechanical craftsman then became the lowly skilled, specialised machine operator. (Huczynski and Buchanan, 2001: pg. 426) Thompson points out that Nissan has calmed its monitoring of its workforce by introducing a ‘ Neighbour Watch System,’ which involves monitoring each other. Post-Fordist changes in the workplace, on the surface have reduced the demand for unskilled labour. Flexible production requires numerate and literate workers, capable of a high degree of self-direction. As a consequence, the number of unskilled industrial workers in the developed world has been falling for nearly thirty years.

Decreased numbers have been reflected in political decline, as unskilled labour lost its leading role in the union movement and union influence in general has waned. This is true to the extent that other factors have played a major role in shaping the path the organisation of work has taken. For example improved education has stimulated greater literacy levels, and unions no longer have as much clout due to the ‘ new right,’ in the 1980’s, crushing them down to size. The main argument is that that flexibility and post-Fordism has been over-simplified. There may well be an improved quality of workers experiences, but that is due to an increased number of jobs available in expanding sectors supplemented by changes in organisations.

Thus while post-Fordism or flexible firms may be present in some specific places, there is no simple overall trend in the nature of work that can be identified.