

The Employer Approach to Industrial Relations Research

L'approche de l'employeur à la recherche en relations industrielles.

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Article abstract

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The Employer Approach to Industrial Relations Research

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Introduction

I must begin by disclaiming any pretense that what I have to say could be regarded as a typical employer viewpoint. I am not sure that such a viewpoint exists or that anyone can in fact speak for employers generally. Perhaps least of all is a research man equipped so to speak. If a man is employed to do research in an organization, surely his usefulness depends on his not accepting the current viewpoint of that organization. As I see it, his role is to be a challenger rather than a spokesman of policy. Furthermore I believe that any organization with a single point of view is in grave danger, because it means simply that all criticism is stifled. For these reasons I beg leave to define the subject of this paper as a researcher's view of the appropriate employer approach.

Two other steps of definition seem to me to be required. When I use the term « Industry » I take a cue from the composition of this panel and refer broadly to the world of work, not narrowly to that sector concerned only with the production of goods. Similarly I interpret the word relations in a broad sense, not merely formalized relations between groups. I am assuming that the range of our interest is the human aspect of the work relation, consisting of how people perform their work, how they are affected by their work, and how they affect one another in and through their work.

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Relating Technology to Human Values

The employer approach to research must start with the employer's problem. It is my view that the employer or manager is in the business of *relating technology to human values*. I stress this statement because I think it is important for Industrial Relations Research to raise the question « What are the governing values? » as well as the question « How can technology best serve those values? »

Traditionally the governing values have been economic. Under this governance, and armed with the vast resources of a scientifically based technology, industry has, at least technically, solved the problem of scarcity. In saying this I do not mean to gloss over the problem of poverty, or of the developing nations, but simply to express the belief that these are not a result of our inability to produce. In human affairs, as one area of concern becomes relatively under control, it is usual for it to recede from the spotlight. So to-day with the removal of scarcity within our grasp, we see arising a recognition that our tremendous material success has been attained at great social and psychological cost. In effect, the question seems to be raised as to whether the traditional governing values should continue to hold their exclusive sway.

The evidence is before us in the daily press that doubts are arising in the public mind about the acceptability of business practices. The reported unwillingness of many of our more educated youth to commit themselves to a business career is another sign. Nor is the criticism confined to those outside of industry. Pick up almost any issue of the *Harvard Business Review* and you are likely to find deep concern on the part of business leaders about questions of values.

Thus I make bold to suggest that questions of values are a proper and necessary area of Industrial Relations Research. What does society expect from industry? When we consider that the course has been set by a dominant minority, presumably dominant not only because of their ability but also because of their high valuation of power and material acquisition, we must deduce that their values are not typical of society at large. Is the public now disposed to challenge the legitimacy of their power? Is there arising more concern with public safety, with public health, and with the amenities of the environment than with further increments of affluence? Now that we have as a society attained relative freedom from the yoke of economic necessity, is there arising a

more active quest for a broader, richer, more deeply satisfying life, both within and outside of work? It is my view that the employer ought to know the answers to these questions of value and that these therefore are a proper area of our research.

How Can Technology Best Be Related to Human Values

Let us turn now to the other question. « How can technology best be related to human values? » In attempting to deal with this my own bias will inevitably intrude and therefore should be made explicit. In general, as you may have guessed already, it is that a broader range of values than the purely economic are relevant as criteria for industry; that because of the place that industry occupies in the life space of the members of our society it is appropriate to optimize its contribution to society as a whole.

The relation of technology to human values can be considered at three levels: viz. the individual, the organizational and the societal. It will be possible within the compass of this paper to touch only on some facets of the relation at each of these levels.

THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

When we consider the impact on the individual, we can claim through behavioral research to have made a beginning at understanding the conditions which encourage an effective contribution and which enable him to derive a high level of satisfaction. Unfortunately very little of this has as yet been applied, and many questions also remain for research. However, of particular import in this day and age is the impact of a rapidly changing technology, and I believe we have failed signally in tackling this. From the employer's point of view, changing technology creates two problems related to individuals. On the one hand the employer is plagued by a shortage of qualified people to fill the increasing numbers of higher level jobs. On the other hand he is faced with surpluses of the unskilled, created by the reduction in the numbers of unskilled jobs.

The usual answer to this dual problem is retraining, aimed at converting the displaced unskilled worker to a person qualified for one of the shortage categories. I suggest the limited success which has been attained with retraining has been due mainly to two factors. First, we

wait until too late; second, we do not select those who are most readily trained. Typically, when a surplus is declared, the « best » workers are retained, the less alert are declared surplus and so marked for re-training. The latter are likely to be least able to acquire the necessary new knowledge and skills. Yet many of them may be quite adequate in their present jobs. The ones retained may, in many cases, be over qualified for their present job and represent a waste of potential. If the employer will look at the total manpower pool so as to identify learning potential and plan upgrading on a chain reaction basis, much of his shortage and surplus problem would be solved. Industrial Relations Research must provide the employer with better means of identifying individual potential and of assessing the real job requirements, because, contrary to management dogma, we simply do not know what are the real psychological demands of jobs or what our people are capable of. Nor indeed do they know, for the reason that many never have had the opportunity to stretch themselves.

The total manpower approach would I believe be a marked advance. However, it is a relatively static and shortsighted approach. It treats change as a problem and as tending to be inimical to human values. I believe that, on the whole, just the opposite is true, that change spells opportunity.

The reason we are deluded in this respect is that our concepts of the working career are antiquated. We have been perpetrating what in another context has been called « planned obsolescence ». We have in effect placed a man in a job and said to him, « You sit there and just keep on doing what you are told ». Ten, fifteen, or twenty years later, when we want to change things, when we bring in the new machines or revamp the system or turn the organization upside down, then we complain because he lacks adaptability. By this time we have persistently and efficiently trained out of him all vestiges of adaptability. We have trained disability.

The new concept that is needed is that of continuing growth throughout the working life. Such opportunity has in the past been limited to the few who were selected for promotion. Now the demands of our changing technology require continuation of learning on the part of all workers. Fortunately, this just happens to coincide with human needs. For generations or technological arrangements have been stifling the growth potentiality of the majority of workers. Now we can no longer afford that even from a pure efficiency point of view.

The general principle, as I see it, is a lifetime of learning and working suited to individual characteristics — different in degree and in kind for different persons. Entering employment should also mean entering a program designed to maintain and extend fitness for work. This will require not only the extension of job skills through sufficient variety of experience, but the continuous refurbishing of education as well. There are many research questions here as to how to create the learning opportunity necessary to avoid stagnation and obsolescence while at the same time effectively contributing to the immediate work product.

I believe that this developmental approach for all the members of the organization will actually contribute to a more effective organization from an economic point of view. This will result from making possible a greater use of the reservoirs of untapped talent which now exist and from raising the level of motivation beyond what we have ever dreamed. However, I believe this approach should be adopted even at some economic cost, if that should prove to be necessary, because the development of the human individual is in itself a value which we should no longer be willing to neglect.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

At the organizational level, in considering the impact of technology on human values, I will be more brief. The most prominent feature of our usual organizations is their hierarchical form. This means that power tends to be concentrated in the hands of a few, by whom the goal setting and planning is primarily done. The members of the organization are thus divided into management and non-management. The latter, the great majority, are relegated to what by comparison are seen as relatively insignificant roles, having their work largely defined for them, and having little influence on the decisions affecting their work life. There is a good deal of evidence that the motivation and satisfaction of the lower levels of the hierarchy is relatively less, with a probability at least, that this is due to their more circumscribed role. In any case, in response to this state of powerlessness a second management has arisen, namely the Union, which has provided a channel of influence, restoring the balance to a degree, but which also tends to have the effect of heightening the horizontal rift between management and non-management.

A further effect of the hierarchical form of organization is to emphasize vertical communication lines as compared with the diagonal and horizontal. Yet these latter may in fact be more important to the work flow. This problem is heightened if, as is usual, there is a tendency to reward departments competitively. Thus the hierarchical form tends to produce vertical as well as horizontal rifts. In the past, control of conflict has been mainly by repression. However, this is increasingly ineffective, particularly as managers themselves are increasingly unwilling to rely on repressive measures.

There have been innovations by way of experimenting with other forms of organization which deemphasize the hierarchy and distribute power in different patterns. In some cases more power has been given to the immediate work group, coupled with more open communication throughout the organization, enabling the members to find channels best adapted to the performance of their own functions. The evidence we have suggests that in some situations innovations of this kind are both productive and satisfying. This work has scarcely begun, so the answers on a wide basis are yet to be found. The best form of organization for achieving the chosen values in various fields of endeavour is, I believe, one of the pressing areas for Industrial Relations Research.

THE SOCIETAL LEVEL

Of all the far reaching effects of Industry on our society, I propose to touch on three in a manner which, even more than what has gone before, amounts to gross oversimplification.

In my view, the unsatisfying and growth-limiting nature of their work has contributed to the frustration, with its subsequent hostilities, and to the apathy and dependency which we find in so many people to-day. On top of this preparation, the commercial branch of industry has brainwashed the citizenry by depicting the good life as being synonymous with material possessions, thus stepping up the tendency to competitive acquisitiveness. Furthermore, springing from rifts which occurred first within the organization, this competitive acquisitiveness has become widely organized. The powerless ones, those who do not belong to a pressure group, are the most obvious victims. What the social and psychological effects are generally, one can only speculate. However, there is a long history of human belief, which crosses cultural lines, that the results of « me firstism », of men being set against one

another, results not only in disaster for society but in conflict and disillusionment within the individual himself. It does not seem a great leap of fantasy to suggest that the « I'm alright Jack » attitude and the phenomenon of the unconcerned spectator are products, at least in part, of this scramble amongst the factions for the material goods produced by our society.

It may seem that I am charging industry with all the world's ills. Were this so, it would be indeed unfair not to enlarge equally on its immense benefits. My purpose has been, not to attach blame, but to express, insofar as my own comprehension permits, what I believe are the most important concerns of the socially responsible employer as these concerns are relevant for Industrial Relations Research.

Conclusion

In brief, my point of view is this. The manager's role is to relate technology to human values. Traditionally the governing value has been productivity in the economic sense. On this basis the role of Industrial Relations Research would be to help the manager to find ways of increasing human productivity within the demands set by the prevailing technology. What I have suggested is that a wider range of human values must be supported, e.g. the satisfying growth of the individual employee. This view asserts that productivity is not the only, and not the over-riding criterion for Industrial Relations Research. I have tried to illustrate, though only in the most general terms, at the individual, the organizational, and the societal level what this view means for the manager, and what questions it prompts him to put to research.

It is certain that I will be charged with being unrealistic. I can only say that I distinguish between a comprehension of reality and a subservience to it. I maintain furthermore that what I have said is a reasonably authentic representation of reality, and that much of reality is of our own making. Presumably a difference reality is also within our power. If it were not so, applied research would be an exercise in futility instead of, as I believe, an important factor in making possible a society that can properly be dignified by the term « civilization ».

L'APPROCHE DE L'EMPLOYEUR À LA RECHERCHE EN RELATIONS INDUSTRIELLES

L'auteur ne prétend pas exposer ici le point de vue des employeurs en général, mais plutôt celui d'un homme de recherche, sur l'attitude la plus appropriée qu'un employeur devrait avoir envers les recherches en relations industrielles. Cet intérêt s'étend à tous les aspects des relations ouvrières et inclut l'exécution du travail, ses effets sur l'ouvrier, les rapports entre individus et ceux entre l'individu et le groupe.

L'employeur doit se préoccuper de la relation entre la technologie et les valeurs humaines. Pour répondre à ce besoin les chercheurs doivent donc se demander « quelles sont les valeurs dominantes » et « comment la technologie peut mieux servir ces valeurs ? »

Les valeurs dominantes traditionnelles étaient économiques. Mais grâce à la technologie, l'industrie a maintenant résolu le problème de la pénurie. Ceci s'est malheureusement fait aux dépens de l'aspect social et psychologique. C'est pourquoi le public est de plus en plus mécontent du fait qu'on néglige d'autres valeurs, comme la santé publique et la sécurité sociale, les aspects agréables du milieu et la satisfaction des employés à leur lieu de travail ainsi qu'à l'extérieur. Les recherches doivent donc aider l'employeur à découvrir les valeurs dirigeantes appropriées.

En ce qui concerne la seconde question, la technologie par rapport aux valeurs humaines, elle peut être considérée au niveau de l'individu, de l'organisation ou de la société. Au niveau de l'individu l'implication du changement est une sphère grandement négligée. On tend à rendre les gens incapable de s'adapter au changement, en les forçant à demeurer dans un emploi restreint pour plusieurs années jusqu'à ce que le travail devienne inutile. Et quand les individus ont perdu la plus grande partie de leur capacité d'apprendre, on essaie de les ré-entraîner pour un nouvel emploi. Mais il est alors trop tard. Nous devons orienter nos recherches sur les façons de maintenir et de développer le potentiel dans chaque être, avec une expérience adéquatement variée et une éducation permanente, tout en maintenant les gens au travail.

La hiérarchie de nos organisations crée une scission horizontale entre la direction et les subordonnés qui en plus est agrandie par la présence des syndicats. Des scissions verticales se produisent aussi à cause de l'identification d'objectifs départementaux et de rivalités inter-départementales. Ainsi est sabordé le flux des communications essentiel au bon fonctionnement et dissipée la motivation à atteindre des buts communs. De nouvelles formes d'organisation doivent être mises à l'essai afin de déterminer la meilleure méthode d'application à différents champs d'activité.

Les effets de l'industrie sur la société en général sont grandement répandus et sont simplement esquissés ici. On constate généralement de nos jours que la nature peu satisfaisante de leur travail et l'amélioration restreinte qu'on y a apportée ont rendu beaucoup d'employés apathiques, hostiles et dépendants. La publicité

continuelle de l'industrie a créé l'idée que les possessions matérielles sont synonymes de bien-être. On a ainsi encouragé un groupe nouveau à exiger les produits matériels que l'on manufacture. On a donc contribué à créer des dissensions dans la société et des conflits chez l'individu.

L'industrie a permis de grandes améliorations dans le domaine matériel, mais cela aux dépens du bien-être social et psychologique de l'individu. Les recherches en relations industrielles doivent aider le plus possible l'employeur à améliorer la société, en tenant compte davantage de la portée des valeurs humaines, e.g. le développement satisfaisant de l'individu. Ce chemin conduit à une véritable civilisation.

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