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Recensions

Book Reviews

Telecommunications: Restructuring Work and Employment Relations Worldwide

edited by Harry C. KATZ, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997, 401 p., ISBN 0-8014-8361-1 (pbk.: alk paper) ISBN 0-8014-3286-3 (cloth: alk. paper).

While the past decade has witnessed no shortage of articles and books on downsizing and restructuring, a lot of the work is practitioner-oriented and not grounded in theory. Moreover, many of the suggestions emerging from the literature are unsupported by research.

Telecommunications: Restructuring Work and Employment Relations Worldwide focuses on change within the telecommunications services industry. The book consists of an "Introduction and Comparative Overview" and ten separate country chapters which range in length from 23 to 58 pages.

Part 1 of the book ("Technology and Market-Driven Restructuring") includes four chapters which address restructuring in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. Part 2, entitled "Labor-Mediated Restructuring", includes chapters on Japan and three European countries (Germany, Norway and Italy). Lastly, Part 3 ("Stated Growth and Modernization"), is comprised of chapters on Mexico and Korea.

The primary objectives of the book are to document and understand the work practices in the telecommunications services industry, explore the differences within and across countries, and explain why practices have (or have not) changed over the past half-century.

In comparative studies, methodological issues are particularly problematic. A number of issues relating to the design of the research warrant mentioning. First, the decision to focus on a single industry permits more meaningful comparison of work practices and policy initiatives across countries. While some readers may not have a strong interest in telecommunications, the industry is one of significant importance in the information age and also an industry that is experiencing dramatic change.

Second, the international nature of the study provides readers with the opportunity to learn about change management in a number of countries. A lot of the earlier research on downsizing and restructuring has been limited to a single country – the international dimension of the project should be of interest to academics, practitioners and policy-makers. Of course, one can always quarrel with the selection of the countries covered in the book – an area of particular interest involves the growth of telecommunications in countries with emerging markets.

Third, the study focuses on five major work practices: (1) employment security (which, not surprisingly, is closely linked with "downsizing"), (2) work organization (such as deskilling, upskilling, team systems, and the impact of technology), (3) training, (4)

compensation (including the use of "contingent" compensation), and (5) governance (with a focus on unionization, the individualization of employment conditions, and decentralized decision-making). The five practices are carefully defined in an appendix to the first chapter.

In some international studies, there has been little attempt to integrate the findings or compare results across countries. This problem is reduced in the book by having the authors of each of the country chapters address the five key work practices. While this is a positive feature of the book, the detail and analysis provided by the authors varies considerably.

Although each of the chapters is informative, the chapter on Canada (written by Verma and Chaykowski) will be of particular interest to Canadian readers. After discussing structural and regulatory developments within the industry, the authors profiled the six major players in the industry. Describing employment relations within the six firms is a challenge but the use of various charts and tables made comparisons among the firms somewhat easier. Still, the need to paint a broader picture of trends within the industry required the inevitable sacrifice of some detail at the firm level.

One section of the chapter dealt with the bargaining priorities of the major telecommunications firms in their negotiations with operators and technicians. With respect to both operators and technicians, increasing the flexibility in scheduling hours and deducing restrictive work rules/practices were viewed as important goals. Other critical issues addressed in the chapter revolved around several initiatives related to work teams, quality improvement programs, and joint union-management initiatives. The information presented in the chapter was based on data ending during the

1993-1994 period. Since the telecommunications industry is undergoing rapid change, it would be very interesting to see follow-up work on subsequent trends and developments within the industry in Canada.

When considering the collection of articles as a whole, a few points come to mind. One of the problems in the downsizing and restructuring literature is a lack of consistent definitions. Although organizational scholars such as Kim Cameron have addressed this issue, there is little reference to this debate in the book. As well, I would have liked to have seen greater acknowledgement of the conceptual and empirical literature from organizational behaviour and organizational theory as it applies to the telecommunications industry.

While Katz does a nice job tying the collection of articles together in chapter one, I found that the book ended rather abruptly. Rather than having a final conclusion or summary chapter, the book simply ends with Chapter 10 on Korea. My preference would have been to separate the material provided in the opening chapter of the book. An introductory chapter could have provided the rationale for the study, the environmental context, the conceptual framework, and detailed information on the research design while reserving the final chapter for the comparative overview and integration of the material from each of the country studies.

Overall, the book makes a significant contribution to the literature on restructuring and its international focus is particularly welcome. While the book is limited to an analysis of the telecommunications industry, it should be of interest to a broader audience. I would strongly recommend the book to anyone interested in exploring organizational change in a global context.

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