

An Analysis of Amazon Practises on Shop Floor Mainly by Taylorism and Additional Theories

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Abstract: This article tries to find to what extent Scientific Management (Taylorism) can be applied to Amazon Warehouse practises. It explains four main principles of Taylorism and attempts to find out if any actual practises are beyond Taylorism but works efficiently nowadays. Then, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory and Edgar Schein's Model of Organizational Culture are used to analyse Amazon's practises that violate Taylorism.

1. Introduction

In current organisational management, knowledge of Taylorism is generally accepted, and even taken as granted in today's production, while scientific management did not come out easily in its historic context. For Amazon, as the world's largest online retailer, some managerial practises in its warehouse are controversial nowadays. This paper will systematically review the practises in Amazon warehouse by using scientific management and other two theories, aiming to critically observe scientific management in modern economic context. First part of this essay will briefly introduce scientific management theory. Second part will integrate scientific management with Amazon warehouse practises to investigate further into its four principles. Next, for those practises that cannot be explained by scientific management will be analysed by Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory and Edgar Schein's Model of Organizational Culture. Finally, in conclusion, this paper finds that although the epic of bringing of science to production by scientific management is welcomed and praised, it can show limitations when it is applied in contemporary entities.

2. Taylorism

Scientific management, also be known as Taylorism after its founding father, was first put forward by Frederic Winslow Taylor at his work as an engineer. Scientific management calls for a scientific method based on standardization of time and motion devoted to each single fragment of task to organize work. The main purpose of bringing science to work is to improve efficiency in a logical and mathematical way.

3. Taylorism and Amazon

3.1 Science of Work

First of all, an essential trait of Amazon's overall managerial practices is measuring (Chaffey 2018), which easily recalls the first principle of Taylorism — science of work. In practice, the first principle of Taylorism refers to time and motion study (T&M), through which, manager uses stopwatch and watches beside the best performing working employee to measure his time for each component of task. Taylor (1919) believes that T&M establishes one best way which is also a

benchmark to produce. In Amazon, “Culture of metrics” was described during an address by Jeff Bezos in January 1997 when Amazon was only at its infancy (Marcus 2004, cited by Chaffey 2018). When we put the concept of measuring in today’s Amazon, it does not refer to consumer orders only, but their workers' production in fulfilment. A survey was done in Amazon shop floor, it was found that 74 percent of staff are afraid to go to bathroom because of the fear of missing relentless targets and receiving warning points (Inquirer et al., 2019). Additionally, as Bloodworth (2019) said during interview, even though employees present sick note from doctor, supervisor would still arrange a disciplinary meeting for discussion of their conduct which drag down production. However, those suffering for workers are not out of management’s expectation, instead, they are all planned by management by assigning quota for each individual. In Amazon, workers are seen to be maximally productive and minimally fatigued in order to achieve those high goals.

Furthermore, according to Arrow (2019), a part-time sorter at amazon fulfilment, there are several works in sorting facility, for example, workers could be stower being responsible for putting packages in individual bags, or store buffer who picks boxes off line and puts them onto carts so that stowers can put the boxes into the bags. It is shown that every position on conveyor belt is closely related to the next one, but Amazon cuts jobs in small movements and assign them to different people in order to measure the smallest element of each job.

As the pioneer of performance-related reward, Taylor motivated his workers in a simple way by monetary incentives — bonus or penalty, but in Amazon, bonus for good practise are becoming smaller due to the raise of minimum pay (Weise, K., 2019). Under Taylorism, T&M facilitates benchmark setting by establishing the optimal time should be spent on each motion of process, but more importantly, it allows labour work to be countable and consequently, in some way, it gives each fragment of work a price tag showing the precise monetary amount for a specific amount of labour work, which makes the whole carrot and stick reward system possible. However, nowadays, employees are having a more reliable increase in their hourly base pay, but bonuses that could be substantial are now gone (Sainato, M., 2019). It appears that monetary reward is no longer incentive for ‘economic man’ in Amazon, which is in contrary to the scientific management reward system. This essay will further discuss real motivation for Amazon shop floor workers.

3.2 Training and Selection

Second principle represents that managers decide and employees follow accordingly, and Grey (2013, pp.36) argues that as decision maker, manager makes one of the most important decisions — who should be employed and who should not.

When it comes to staff training, it is management’s duty to develop employees to their best potential through training or educating (Clegg, 2019). In contrast to Taylorism, Amazon does provide staff training, but in a cost and time efficient way. Bloodworth (2019) finds it rather difficult remembering all important operating process after his training session which largely involved taking through telescoped knowledge in only four days. It suggests the high costs devoted to serious staff training and selecting which are required under Taylorism may not be adaptable in current fast-paced production that requires less techniques.

3.3 Division of Work

Although division of work is recognised to be a very logical and scientific way of organizing production, it still has disadvantages and literally comes out of stereotype, which is rather irrational concerning its history context. In the past, it was normal for workers to decide how their work to be done on a rule-of-thumb basis, but Taylor claimed that it is manager who should be organising and supervising the whole work, while workers are to execute (Clegg, 2019), which brought hierarchy into work. Although this mode of separating work, it entails a massive transfer of power relations from employees to managers, which eliminates discretion from workers and leads to de-skilling of staff, worsely, it could give rise to conflicts between workers and managers (Grey, 2013). Also, an early study (Taylor, 1919, cited by Schein, 2017,) demonstrated that Taylor was also bothered by workers who did not work at best potential, which is the origin of this principle. At the time of America when Taylorism was introduced, a large of migrant workforce created huge cultural

difference among people who worked and who owned production. Perceiving workers by strong racial prejudice, Taylor, a protestant with Scottish background, did not trust his workers who are Catholics and Jewish from Ireland and East Europe (Grey, 2012).

At Amazon, there is a highly centralized managerial structure, management makes decisions for production, with little input from lower-level employees who are mainly in charge of manual work, which reflects some thoughts of Taylorism. Owing to the use of technology, nearest route to ordered item shelf is not designed by worker but Sanav. When items are ordered, pickers are navigated by Sanav in massive warehouse (Simon, 2019). Workers are only accountable for walking to the right shelf and picking the right item, which leaves the rest of the work to algorithm which is designed by management as the way they desire, presenting a strict division of mental and manual work. Moreover, digital monitoring system displays supervision by management which is part of manager's work according to Taylorism. The documents obtained by Lecher (2019) revealed Amazon's automated termination system. According to the letter, Amazon's IT system tracks the rates of each associate's productivity, and automatically generates warning points or even terminations regarding workers' performance, even without the involvement of supervisor, which is more neutral than human decisions. The replacement of human's labour in monitoring by digital technology brings higher efficiency and cuts costs for human labour in management, which shows weakness of Taylorism. More importantly, algorithm is an enhancement of Taylorism by being more neutral, and without bias towards different workers.

4. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory and Edgar Schein's Model of Organizational Culture

4.1 Clever Motivation for Associates

Under scientific management, employees are economic men, pursuing money but nothing else, while in contemporary society, monetary returns are very short-term and current people tend to have higher levels of demand, say job security or legal employee benefits. Amazon literally understands what employee need and integrate those demands into organizing work. Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) established a hierarchy of needs linking personality and motivation, ranging needs from basic survival needs up to self-actualization, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory suggests that once a level of needs have been met, they no longer motivate, and then a higher one emerges and becomes dominant. According to Bloodworth (2019), zero-hours contract which brings job precarity is extensively used for staff in Amazon. Under zero-hours contract, no guaranteed set hour or job security and shifts can be cancelled at any call, this is literally an agreement between employer and employee on a work-on-demand basis without fixed working hours and minimum payment. After nine months trial period, Amazon will either take in workers as permanent staff or cast them away relentlessly. It is an extremely tempting prize for agency workers that if they work hard, they will be 'granted' blue badge, actual employment contract and also their following employee benefits in wellbeing or staff development benefits, etc, but the prizes entail exceptional performance on picking rates, attendance, or compliance to regulations in nine-months temporary contract (Bloodworth, 2019). In fulfilment centre, winning a blue badge is like 'carrot' which in return for meeting shift targets for Amazon (O'Connor, 2019). It appears that incentives for staff are not only about money, but the "badge" which is actually job security. Moreover, while temporary workers are undertaking precarious work, Amazon is not putting their permanent staff on safe land. The thing is Amazon keeps warning their permanent workers that those limited vacancies are for best-performing workers (Schein, A., 2017, pp.1559-1562).

Working at Amazon leaves both temporary and permanent workers out of breath, while for Amazon, agency worker usage is a setup that provides the ultimate flexibility and allows Amazon to cut liability costs relating to employee's fundamental benefits. What makes the most is that for all staff, the motivation for job security and legal employee benefits push them to perform at their best and consequently, to bring the most economic benefits to Amazon. This motivation is no longer be explained by Taylorism, which somehow reveals some limitation of Taylorism.

4.2 Deceptive Logo and Artificial Language

Considering the whole management within Amazon warehouse, adding cultural element is also an essential component that should not be overlooked and cannot be explained by Taylorism. The recognizable arrow smile logo of Amazon not only tells that it sells everything from A to Z, but represents the information that staff in Amazon is working happily with big smiles. However, the smile is a visual artefact that created by Amazon, aiming to describe their jobs as positive, enjoyable, fast-paced but bringing a sense of enrichment to employees. Edgar Shein (2017) distinguishes collective behaviours into three levels of organizational culture: artefacts, values and assumptions (Clegg, 2019). Artefacts are some elements overt and visible to outsiders, conveying directed obvious messages. Values are the organisation's statement of values or norms. They are often reinforced in public declarations by representing some core values or repeating some common phrases. Then, if we dig below the surface, some essence of beliefs that are deeply embedded but can be unnoticed are basic assumptions. Although the smile is on their boxes, trucks, webpage and fulfilment centre wall, ironically, a recent survey done by Worker Rights Platform Organise shows that 55 percent of warehouse employees have suffered depression since working at Amazon (Lecher, 2019). On Amazon latest strike during 2019 Black Friday, strike workers redesigned look of the yellow upward smile arrow to a black downward arrow on their posters, showing their true emotions at work (BBC News, 2019).

Moreover, the language used for warehouse and warehouse workers are also artefacts. Warehouse is called "fulfilment centre" by Amazon. All employees are associates, rather than ordinary employees or workers (Cain and Hamilton, 2019); even on the first day of James's work, he was told that Jeff Bezos is also an associate, which implies that everyone is equal and part of Amazon happy big family. Amazon tries to hide the real power relations and strict hierarchy within the company by those artificial languages. What's more, when people lost their job, they are not sacked or fired, but "released" (James Bloodworth slams working conditions in Amazon warehouse (video), 2019). Amazon seems to have its own trick in sugar-coating serious situations for workers by their language and logo as cultural artefacts, aiming to make up work condition, and deceiving the public by trying to hide the true story happening in fulfilment centre. Those pretty words related warehouse people and adorable logo cannot be explained by Taylorism, while they do convey some positivity to the public. This means that some cultural artefacts usage in management can also be important in today's cultural environment.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, for most of practices of Amazon, for example in task segmentation, standardization, high targets or rigid division of work are reflecting the philosophy of Taylorism well. By contrast, monetary incentives, careful staff training and selection, the utilization of technology and beautifying work condition by logo and language are unlikely to be explained by Taylor's theory. Instead of simply motivating staff by money, Amazon establishes a smarter firing system which creates unstableness of job and further motivates workers by the security of the job itself. Additionally, Amazon does its best minimize the costs and time devoted to staff training and selection, which is in contrary to Taylorism, but it brings significantly higher efficiency to work that does not require much knowledge. Moreover, guiding and monitoring reflects the thought of division of work, but the usage of tech in guiding and monitoring allows management to be more neutral, lowers the cost of human management and improves the efficiency. Finally, management should not only be managing people, but making the job more unique by artificial language and logo, which is not enlightened by Taylorism, but seems to be needed today. Overall, despite the fact that Taylorism was nearly human's first rational attempt to systematic industrial management and has huge impact on management afterwards, to some extent, it does not adapt to today's profit-obsessed and fast-paced businesses such as Amazon. Scientific management has its valuable part, but its dark side is also worth thinking.

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