Chapter VIII

Old and New Timings in a High-Tech Firm

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ABSTRACT

We use a lens of organizational time and timings in a recent historical study of high-tech engineers in one leading U.S. firm, Techco. Our aim is to arrive at a nuanced account of whether such engineers emerge as being either highly privileged knowledge workers or as being “caught in the middle” between management and labor with no shelter from the harshest dynamics of capitalism. At the time being studied, senior management had introduced a range of measures, the effect of which was to disrupt existing organizational timings and so to threaten both the work and the self-identity of engineers. However, we argue that such disruption does not originate solely from management action. Instead the speed of technological change itself threatens to swamp the engineers, the very architects of such progress at the same time as new notions of organizational space render them more visible to senior management gaze.

INTRODUCTION

There are at least two diametrically opposed views of hi-tech engineers. On the one hand, as knowledge workers (Alvesson, 2000; Knell, 2000) they have been viewed as highly privileged, with substantial autonomy and as able to influence greatly their terms and conditions of work. However, there is also an older literature on the position of engineers within U.S. and UK firms (e.g., Creighton & Hodson, 1997; Whalley, 1986), which views these workers as caught in the middle between the shop floor and management, and so as subject to the harshest dynamics of capitalism. This chapter will attempt to arrive at a more nuanced view by conducting a recent historical study of the position of a group of high-tech engineers (“techies”) in the UK R&D centre of a leading U.S. firm. In order to achieve this, we present a longitudinal case study exploring engineers’ iden-
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tity work using a lens of time and organizational timings. This is justified on the basis that not only has time and timings been little researched in the management literature (Lee & Liebenau, 1999), but also because time is argued to be central to understanding identity and power.

We find that there are two major aspects of techies’ identity work. The first is their desire to differentiate themselves strongly from managers whom in the words of one of the lab directors, they regard as “primeval slime.” Secondly, a common desire of techies is to want to change the world in some way through what they have achieved at work. Given this, techies talk emotionally of needing to “survive” in the workplace and of how difficult this is when projects are “killed.” We argue that under the changed timings, this has significant implications for intra-organizational power relations and so for techie identity.

The chapter is structured as follows. We first explore the key role of high-tech engineers as knowledge workers and the extent to which they vest issues of identity in their work. This raises issues of existential insecurity and its relationship to time and organizational timings. After discussing methodology and method, we introduce the case study, setting out how Techco is perceived to be breaking with its past in important ways. We chart how the changes have been introduced in the name of rationality in contrast to the perceived “messiness” of the past. Under the changes, engineers employ a range of tactics to limit what they see as the damage wrought by the introduction of a new planning time. In the discussion and conclusion section we argue that organizational timings have adopted an altogether new character in contrast with the remembered cosiness of the past. While this has significant implications for both intra-organizational power relations and techie self-identity, other threats also arise. These include the sheer speed of technological change, which techies fear as leading to the obsolescence of their skills as well as the advent of new organizational spacings, rendering engineers more vulnerable to senior management gaze. Such threats cause considerable anguish to techies who are united in wanting to make a contribution to the world in some way.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Key Role of High-Tech Engineers as Knowledge Workers

Given the key role of technological change in generating profits and the perceived increase in the rate of innovation in recent years (see Cooper, 2001; Tidd, Besant, & Pavitt, 1997), knowledge workers such as the Techco hi-tech engineers are the subject of much debate within the management literature and more generally. Indeed, Creighton et al. (1997) argue that with the increasing importance of technical work, there is potential for a return to levels of pre-Industrial Revolution craft autonomy. Such a view is supported by Knell (2000) and Alvesson (2000) who argue that knowledge workers such as engineers working in R&D enjoy greater discretion, voice, and responsibility than other employees. Indeed Alvesson stresses the need to manage the unwanted exit from the firm of such employees in order to avert real damage being done to the organization. According to such views, hi-tech engineers therefore emerge as being a highly privileged group largely immune for example from the negative effects of job insecurity characteristic of other workers in the U.S. and the UK (Heery & Salmon, 2000).

However, there is another literature on the role of engineers within capitalist economies. In view of the tricky relationship between technological advance and commercial constraints, Whalley (1986) for example, argues that this needs to be actively managed. Promising projects from a technological viewpoint do not guarantee profits but engineers are frequently unwilling to subordinate their technical and scientific orientation to constraints arising from the search for profits.