

Knowledge Worker

A Letter to Mr. Taylor

(June 2013)

This month's column consists of a letter to Frederick Winslow Taylor. I found creating it a useful way of thinking about the differences in the nature of work between our times and his.

April 7, 2013

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Dear Mr. Taylor:

I hope this letter finds you in good spirit and receptive to some new insights regarding "Scientific Management." I am writing because there have been many changes in the world of work and working since you set out to study work, worker and working in a scientific way.

We are told by Frank Copley, your biographer that your last known act was to wind your pocket watch (a nurse in the hospital where you were being treated for influenza overheard you doing so). Given that time is important to you, allow me to say right away that the work of my time is very, very different from the work of your time. Describing those differences and their implications for the practice of management is my aim in this letter. Please bear with me as I proceed.

First, know that the larger context for studying work, workers and working is very different from the circumstances of your time. The larger economy in which businesses operate has gone from local to regional to national to international and now global. The management of most businesses has been divorced from ownership. In your day, you worked for the owners of the enterprise. Save for a few exceptions, there are no actively engaged owners nowadays; instead, we have legions of stockholders and legions of professional managers and executives claiming to serve them. Another major difference, which you are certain to appreciate, is the extent to which technology is now a factor in the workplace, especially as relates to computers (a technology that wasn't available in your day). Finally, today's employees are much better educated than was the case in your time. That phlegmatic Schmidt of whom you wrote is the exception today instead of the norm.

I mention these contextual changes merely to apprise you of some significant differences between our worlds. They are not the focal point. My focus here, just as yours was so long ago, is work. Here, too, there are some momentous changes.

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For one thing, the basis of work has changed dramatically. In your time, Mr. Taylor, the basis of work consisted of materials, whether being worked upon by lathes and lathe operators in machine shops or by shovels in the hands of men like Schmidt. The basis of work nowadays is information, not materials. I am confident you can guess at the significance of a shift such as this.

For another, the nature of working has changed in correspondingly dramatic ways. The essence of your approach was to study work and worker and your studies depended on your being able to observe the worker at work. Working was an overt, physical activity and you could indeed observe and study it. Working is now a covert activity, it takes place in the recesses of the mind where no one can get at it and, strange as it might seem, that often includes the worker.

The shift in work from interactions with materials to interactions with information means that many such interactions occur between and among people. As you well know, information and knowledge are shared and applied by people. Just as you were able to turn over materials-based work to machines we are able to assign some information-based work to the machines of our time – computers. However, this kind of information-based or “knowledge work” as some call it, is just as amenable to being “routinized” as was the materials-based work of your day. It involves no ambiguity or uncertainty.

We are left, then, with work that is information-based, varies greatly from situation to situation and from person to person and, most important, it cannot be routinized. Where you, sir, were able to study, observe and analyze materials-based work so as to define the “one best way,” we cannot do so. You were able to prefigure the working routines to which a worker should adhere. You were able to select and train workers to carry out those routines. And your clients, the owners of the businesses where you did your work, were able to issue instructions, provide incentives and impose sanctions to ensure compliance with them. Again, owing to the observable nature of the work and working of your time, the owners could rely on direct supervision to ensure compliance with that “one right way.”

In today’s world of work, Mr. Taylor, many if not most employees must configure their responses to the situation at hand. They, not industrial engineers like you, Carl Barth and Frank and Lillian Gilbreath, must figure out what to do and how to do it. They must engineer solutions to the problems they encounter. If anyone in today’s world is to study work and working so as to make it more productive it is the worker.

Yet, despite these deep and fundamental changes, your legacy persists – and rightly so. There is still a great deal of materials-based work to be done and people who must do it. Therein lies a great problem, Mr. Taylor. You see, the methods of Scientific Management were and still are well-suited to materials-based work, but they do not work with the knowledge work of our time.

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Managing work and workers is no longer a simple matter of issuing instructions and then providing appropriate incentives. In today's world of work and working, managers must provide support instead of supervision; they must collaborate instead of command; they must elicit contributions from the workers instead of ensuring compliance; they must figure out how best to deploy the worker instead of simply employ him or her.

In the end, Mr. Taylor, we are indeed greatly in your debt as well as to those who followed you. But, frankly, sir, we are in desperate need of a new practice of management, one more suited to the work of our time. Perhaps we will be fortunate enough to have someone come along and do for knowledge work what you did for manual work; namely, figure out how to make it more productive in ways that benefit everyone.

In closing, please know that your accomplishments regarding work and working are without parallel. Your place in history is assured. Rest in peace.

Respectfully,

Frederick W Nickols

About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the manager partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Worker's Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns and access to them is available [here](#).