IEA 50th anniversary 2006

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WORK ORGANIZATION AND WORKING CONDITIONS IN NON-TRADITIONAL JOBS. ERGONOMICS VS. NEOLIBERALISM.

In the past twenty years, industrialized countries have encountered a new economic and social life megatrend, a globalized market and neoliberalism. The structure and location of industrial production and services, work tasks and their content are about to change radically. Without a doubt, ergonomics is also facing changes and new challenges. In a few words, the contents of the neoliberalistic trend (as seen through an ergonomist's eyes) can be outlined as follows: Traditionally paid labor has been structured around employers' and employees' roles. The employer took care of the working tools, work organization, the work environment, and obviously, paid the salary. The employee was supposed to do a "fair day's' work". The employee also demanded decent working conditions and wanted continuous and predictable employment with an optimal work exchange ratio (working conditions, pay vs. decent life).

Now it seems that the employer – employee setting is about to change, with the employer function and entrepreneur responsibility tending to become delicate. The organizations want to concentrate on their essential business, by outsourcing less important work to other companies that supposedly do the task more efficiently. The proportion of part-time employees is increasing and full-time salaried employees are supposed to enter into an ongoing competition situation to keep their expertise up to date and their portofolios well padded. To paraphrase John Kenneth Galbraith: earlier St. Peter might have been content asking at the gate to eternity what the candidate had done to increase the GNP, but now he asks what qualities the candidate had improved on earth to be useful at work.

The reason for the neoliberal metamorphosis is basically to improve the use of ressources – as such, this is nothing new – but the overriding goal now is to increase the profit of capital investment. Earlier, a decent profit was 5 % or so, but nowadays the goal is 15 – 20%. Lazy money is definitely out. If the yield is not sufficient, investors will withdraw.

The pros and cons of the consequences of neoliberalistic economics' trends have been widely analyzed and results largely mediatized. From ergonomics' point of view, no clear image of eventual future threats or positive opportunities can be outlined. On the macroeconomic level, opinions published by OECD seem to admit that problems may appear but that positive effects are sufficient to counteract them. The International Labour Organisation, ILO (IEA is NGO in ILO!) seems to be worried about the neoliberalistic trends, but also their point of view is on a macro level. Howard Stein, the organizational consultant and a critic of neoliberal trends, criticizes the development that occurred in the US in 1980 - 2000 as a threat to human dignity when employees were considered exclusively as an item of cost that can be sacrificed to competition and proprietorship values.

Parallelisms between participatory ergonomics and neoliberalistic work organization.

In the 1980's a new term appeared in the ergonomics' vocabulary: participatory ergonomics. The background was an increasing awareness of Japanese industrial work organization, which proved to

be efficient. It also stressed the need for worker participation. Quality circles, Toyotisme, autonomous groups, and empowerment were some of the concepts promoted. The "Participatory Egonomics" of K. Kogi and A. Imada showed that links existed between ergonomics and the new forms of industrial work organization. It also showed that these forms of organization were an efficient means of improving production and that the experience could be transferred to North - American industrial culture.

The criticisme of Taylorisme had already in the beginning of the twentieth century shown the harmfull effects, both psychological and physical, of parcelized and monotonous work, alienation, lack of autonomy, etc. Participatory ergonomics aimed to improving working conditions by attacking the tayloristic elements in the workplace. The means consisted of eliciting the workers' and supervisors' intimate knowledge of the work through various group working techniques. The result was supposed to lead to an broader enlarged role for of workers in the redesign of work and organization. The debate about on the ownership of results, "democratization" of job, and collective workplace redesign, etc., seems to have remained relatively rare amongst ergonomists.

Whether participatory ergonomics was largely accepted and used is not known. It did not become a megatrend but neither did it fade away, as shown by the number of scientific publications.

The interesting point is that participatory ergonomics promoted the same features as does modern neoliberalistic work organization: freedom from time pressure, less control by direct management, and the possibility of organizing one's job according to the needs. The proponents of participatory ergonomics may not have noticed that follow-up and control of results became reciprocally more tighter.

In the new situation, the employee becomes – be it via neoliberalistic or participatory ergonomics work organization - a self responsable entrepreneur-worker. The company withdraws to the background while the planning of work, the ordering of the material, responsability for quality, and the care of customer relations remain the responsibility of the entrepreneur-worker. The supervisor support, and training in the task may or may not be available to the entrepreneur-worker. It should be noted, however, that half of the employees are willing to choose a self responsable job. Some feel that it fits their mentality or that it is compatible with their life situation.

Many of the above points seem to be a response to taylorism's critics and along the lines of participatory ergonomics' recommendations. They have also been shown to improve work efficiency.

But the negative aspects – proven or presumed – are also numerous. The company/employer tends to withdraw from immediate responsibility: "You may do the job as you will, as far the results are there." The objectives can be negociated, but if they are not reached there is no safety net. Entrepreneur-workers seem to do more unpaid overtime than in more traditional jobs. According to the case studies, burn-out is common.

Industrial jobs are not the only ones involved. Nor are negative effects limited to the lowest level of organization. Actually the middle level of the organization is the main target, and middle management does not escape either. Many service occupations are also affected, especially in health care, information technology etc. The full picture of the situation is not available.

Ergonomics in the face of neoliberalism: Observer or initiator?

What could be the role of ergonomics in the new situation? To remain an observer or intervene as circumstances require, or take a proactive stance, trying to predict problems and identifying

corrective means? Whatever the choice, it should be understood that classical ergonomics' intellectual tools and concepts, which concentrate on workplace issues may not be sufficient to deal with new problems in work organization and working life. The boundaries between neighboring scientific domaines may have to be crossed. Organizational psychology and elements of cultural anthropology (sociology) are the first two walls to come up against.

The second question deals with the role of traditional ergonomics' interest areas in the new situation such as biomechanics, applied physiology or sensory psychology. Do VDU workplaces still interest researchers? What about tools?

The author of these lines thinks that ergonomists should begin to reflect on what role to assume, passive or proactive, with respect to the novel work organizations created by neoliberalism. An entirely passive stance might lead to missed important opportunities. An opposite position might require making a quantum leap to scientific areas where ergonomists generally have little experience. Even in a successful case, the risk is that some traditional interest groups would not be willing to follow, and ergonomics might loose them.