Applied Ergonomics 40 (2009) 775–780

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Applied Ergonomics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/apergo

The good work – A Swedish trade union vision in the shadow of lean production

Jan Johansson*, Lena Abrahamsson

Luleå University of Technology, Human Work Sciences, 97187 Lulea, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 6 August 2007
Accepted 16 August 2008

Keywords:
Work environment
Work organisation
Lean production

ABSTRACT

"The Good Work" (*Det goda arbetet*) was established as a highly praised and established concept in the Swedish working life debate in the middle of the 1980s. In this paper, we are going to discuss the concept in relation to the massive introduction of lean production in Swedish industry. The aim of this paper is to restore the theory of the good work into the industrial society of today. We will search for a model for 'good work' in balance between the demands from production and good conditions for a learning environment.

The theoretical base for this paper will be found in both organisational research and research on production technology systems. We identify three strong trends in Swedish industrial companies giving both pitfalls and possibilities for the good work; the learning focus as a way to increase productivity and improve working conditions; Lean Production in most cases imply narrow short-cyclic work tasks; and the global market that reduces national discretion. As a result, we formulate a new set of criteria for "the good work".

© 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

"The Good Work" (a translation of the Swedish concept *Det goda arbetet*) stands for a normative theory formulated by the Swedish Metalworkers' Union during the 1980s. The theory specifies norms for the conditions of a good work and a good work place, norms that were partly based on state of the art of the socio-technical and macro ergonomic research of the 1970s and 1980s and partly a set of political considerations. Parts of the theory can also be found in the modern management discourse from the 1990s and 2000s. The starting point of the paper is that the debate, ideas and strategies of "the good work" are rather invisible today. Our object in view is not to decide if the Swedish Metalworkers' Union was right or wrong, we rather want to discuss the concept of "the good work" in relation to a new theoretical and industrial context. "The good work" is not something that is given for all times, but rather something that continually must be updated in relation to new technology and changes in the social contexts.

In this paper, we are discussing the concept of the good work in relation to the current management discourse and the prevailing industrial context. We identify three strong trends giving both pitfalls and possibilities for the good work; the learning focus as a way to increase productivity and improve working conditions; Lean Production in most cases imply narrow short-cyclic work tasks; and the global market that reduces national discretion. At the end of the paper, we present a proposal for a new model for "the good work" in balance between the demands from production and good conditions for a learning environment.

2. The historic roots

2.1. From consensus to conflict

In Sweden, the trade union movement has a long tradition of involvement in the technical and organisational development of working life (Johansson, 1988), and at the Swedish Trade Union Confederation's (LO) congress in 1971 they took an important step forward when they introduced work environment and democracy issues into the political agenda. In the report *Demokrati i företagen* (Democracy in Companies) (LO, 1971) we can for the first time discern traces of "the good work" concept even if it was not yet formulated. Inspiration came from the socio-technical school and its attempts with autonomous groups in Norway (Thorsrud and Emery, 1969).

In the beginning, industrial democracy was organised in cooperation with the Swedish Employer Association (SAF). This cooperation, however, did not work as smoothly as originally thought, a situation that led to the initiative being moved to SAF and its local member companies. The lack of success led to a growing division between SAF and LO, causing the trade union movement to turn to the Social Democratic Party for support to secure a minimum degree of co-determination guaranteed by law. The climate worsened as LO

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +46 70 5593039.
E-mail address: Jan.Johansson@ltu.se (J. Johansson).

0003-6870/$ – see front matter © 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.apergo.2008.08.001

began demanding power over the means of production. LO introduced the proposal for the Employee Investment Funds, which would have led to all industrial production becoming employee control and owned.

Employers and the trade union movement took different routes and under the threat of the Employee Investment Funds, SAF developed its own vision under the name *Annorlunda fabriker* (Different kinds of factories) (Agurén and Edgren, 1979). SAF vision was more focused on technical solutions combined with interesting work roles based on the socio-technical approach. The question of power over the means of production made it impossible to continue cooperation. LO's largest union, the Swedish Metal Workers' Union, wanted to push the issue.

2.2. The Swedish Metal Workers' Union takes the initiative…

The Swedish Metal Workers' Union (Metall) formulated its famous concept of "the good work" at its 1985 congress. The report was entitled *Det goda arbetet* (The Good Work) (Metall, 1985) and discussed work from many aspects, where the production-technical and work organisational issues were central. Based on this analysis, Metall formulated nine principles for how good work can be attained (Table 1). These principles constitute "the good work".

If one compares Metall's "the good work" with the socio-technica approach, it becomes evident that Metall has expanded the perspective from the work place to conditions on the labour market. This can be interpreted as an effect of the existing tension between Metall and the employers. Metall was trying to strengthen its position on the labour market where government regulations were increasingly being challenged. Metall's formulation of criteria for "the good work" were quickly adopted by the trade union movement as a whole and at the 1991 LO congress, a large congress report was presented under the title, *Det utvecklande arbetet* (The developing work) (LO, 1991).

2.3. … at the same time as the industrial context changes

At this time (late 1980s and 1990s), "the good work" met a new industrial context that is often called Lean Production. Lean is not a new idea. In fact, it has been a guiding star throughout the growth of industrialisation. Adam Smith argued for thrift with manpower in his classic example of needle production (Smith, 1776/1976). Frederick Winslow Taylor refined lean production in his article *The Principles of Scientific Management* (Taylor, 1913/1972). Industrial production has since then continually been on a diet, but its character has varied over time and this variation has been the key for how work has been organised.

During the late 1980s, a relatively drastic shift occurred primarily related to new problems confronted by industry (Johansson, 1999). These were primarily low productivity and major quality problems in products. To this point, production technicians had tried to solve problems by investing more, although in too many of these cases the investments had not been profitable enough. Now other solutions were needed based on the more efficient use of existing production equipment and at the same time taking advantage of the potential found among skilled labour. Organisation and leadership thus became more important. The new solutions corresponded with trade union demands from the 1970s and early 1980s. The companies not only accepted demands for group work, but also took up the initiative to develop them. Competence development was also introduced as a new element in discussions about a new work organisation. The struggle for industrial democracy was not a real struggle at all, but rather a new type of consensus between companies and unions.

Table 1
The nine principles for the good work (Metall, 1985).

1.	Job security
2.	A fair share of production earnings
3.	Co-determination in the company
4.	A work organisation for cooperation
5.	Professional know-how in all work
6.	Training – a part of work
7.	Working hours based on social demands
8.	Equality at the work place
9.	A working environment without risk to health and safety

2.4. A new management discourse

These complicated patterns and to some extent even contradictory trends can also be seen in the rich flora of new management theories spreading across the world during the 1980s and 1990s. The original impulses often came from Japan, but their more prominent advocates were American researchers and consultants (Furusten, 1999). Below is a summary of the major management concepts (production and organisation models, methods and tools) of the last 15–20 years in an approximate chronological order, as they have appeared in Sweden.

Lean Production (Womack et al., 1991) was the first major production concept in Sweden in the 1990s after the Japan euphoria of the 1980s. Its popularity has since risen and fallen, but today (2007) the concept has achieved a renaissance albeit a modified form. The focus is on effective resource management that is achieved with the help of fewer personnel, smaller spaces, shorter processing times, smaller stocks, and fewer suppliers. *Continual improvements* (kaizen), and *Just in time production* are important parts of Lean Production. This often means a flow-based layout where machines are either placed in line-like flow groups or in concrete assembly lines, which is becoming more common. Even so, the organisation structure is maintained nearly intact. Personnel are expected to be disciplined, flexible, responsible, multitalented, and be prepared to work overtime. In Sweden, employees are simply called "colleagues".

The other major concept, *Total Quality Management* (TQM) (Feigenbaum, 1961; Deming, 1982), is closely related to Lean Production. It has had a similar popularity timeline and is still around, but it is often an integrated module in other concepts. The basis for TQM is that all errors and deviations have basic causes that can be addressed and that preventive quality measures are profitable. The goal is "zero errors". Working with TQM also means measuring and calculating errors and variations, documenting and standardising of routines and work methods, certification for a quality system, and, above all, focusing on quality and customer value. *Six Sigma* (McFadden, 1993) and *Total Productive Maintenance* (Nakajima, 1988) can be seen as relatives to TQM. Important aspects are participation and commitment in quality work both from management and personnel. The organisational form promoted by TQM is a group-based organisation where the supervising role of managers is toned down, teamwork is emphasised, and walls between departments are removed.

Another major trend in the 1990s was *Time Based Management* (TBM) (Stalk and Hout, 1990). This is the concept that is based mostly on reducing through times. It has major aspects of classical capital rationalisation and is time and process oriented. ABB's T50 project is perhaps the best-known Swedish organisation example. T stands for time and 50 for a 50% reduction in time from order to delivery. The organisation forms that TBM promoted, particularly in Sweden, were objective oriented work teams with good opportunities for learning and competence development.

The concept *Business Process Re-engineering* (BPR) (Hammer and Champy, 1993) came in the mid-1990s and all operations are seen

دریافت فوری ← متن کامل مقاله

ISIArticles
مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات