7-1982

[Review of the Book *Frederick W. Taylor and the Rise of Scientific Management*]

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Abstract

[Excerpt] Daniel Nelson has written an informative book that helps to explain important aspects of Taylor's life. But the analysis of the man, his influence, and the opposition both engendered is too narrowly cast to serve as a final rebuttal to Taylor's critics. By 1923, Nelson writes toward the end of his book, Taylor's reputation was secure and worker opposition to his approach was low: "The unionists had mellowed," Nelson comments. Yet the reader is never informed that this "mellowing" occurred in the midst of the most severe and pervasive anti-union campaign to that date in American history. This omission suggests the limits of Nelson's analysis.

Keywords
Frederick W. Taylor, scientific management, labor relations, labor history

Disciplines
Human Resources Management | Labor History | Labor Relations | Unions

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Required Publisher Statement
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Fourth, recruitment effectiveness affects an employee’s organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and voluntary turnover. That is, when candidate expectations are inflated beyond reality, a substantial decline in job satisfaction and commitment can be expected. There is a tendency for voluntary turnover to increase. People need complete and valid information to make choices for themselves. Finally, selection effectiveness has an impact on both job performance and involuntary turnover. Personnel specialists emphasize matching individual skills with job requirements to achieve requisite performance levels. If individuals then fail to achieve required outputs, they are terminated.

The unifying idea in the book is the recognition that those fulfilling the personnel function must be able to select competent workers, help managers achieve good levels of performance, and assist in retaining competent individuals. The employment activity can be instrumental in this process and can furthermore contribute to organizational continuity and growth if it successfully bridges individual and organizational needs.

The subject matter of the book is developed in six chapters. The first chapter describes the assessment center in the broader context of organizational entry. On the other hand, selection interviewing receives comparatively little attention, yet it has come to be exceedingly important, vis-à-vis testing, because of equal employment considerations. The growing visibility and the continued existence of “equal employment” for some fifteen years have dramatically shifted the focus and activities of “organizational entry,” thus affecting all aspects of the employment function. The author is well aware of EEO considerations, as is evident from his recommendation of “Arvey (1979) for an up-to-date treatment of selection techniques and legal technicalities and the mention of equal employment matters at different points.” Yet such references are inadequate for the personnel manager who must deal with these problems daily and in a practical way. They also fall short of the student’s need to understand the employment process in the equal employment framework. In this context, the academic may also feel “slighted” in the sense that equal employment matters require a substantive refocus of organizational entry activity.

Another area undeveloped in the book is that of technology and its impact on performance and the human experience. As a major topic, technology has been treated extensively in the literature. Yet, in this book, the “determinants of employee job performance” model is developed along classical lines and rests solely on employee ability and motivation. The technology factor is needed, however, to explain those situations where motivation is poor but technological pacing or controls “force” performance. Poor motivation is apt to surface in such situations but not necessarily in connection with performance, at least not in the short run. Since performance is a major consideration throughout the book, a more thorough understanding of such factors as technology is needed.

The author has done an injustice to his fine work in the area of “realistic job previews” and organizational entry by attempting to satisfy too many audiences and, within the confines of this trim volume, being unable fully to develop ideas for all three—practitioners, academics, and students. Nevertheless, practitioners and academics who are familiar with the general behavioral and personnel literature will find Wanous’s ideas challenging and likely to bring about more extensive inquiry in this key area.

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Management

Frederick W. Taylor and the Rise of Scien-

Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856–1915) is best remembered as the father of scientific management who, in his experiments at the Midvale Steel Company in the 1880s and later at Bethlehem Steel, sought to modernize and rationalize industrial production. Neither in his time nor since, however, have Taylor’s efforts been greeted solely with acclaim. In his recent book, Labor and Monopoly Capital, Harry Braverman sharply etched one persistent critique of Taylorism when he argued that scientific management’s ultimate purpose was a division of labor so precise that workers became but minute ciphers manipulated at will by an army of white-collar management experts. Toward the end of his life, Taylor himself established the basis for this analysis. In his 1911 essay, The Principles of Scientific Management, Taylor explained his system largely through a discussion of his reorganization of the work routines of common laborers at Bethlehem Steel between 1898 and 1901. To drive the point home, Taylor offered a detailed analysis of one Bethlehem worker, the famous “Schmidt.” This man was a brute, “stupid and phlegmatic,” Taylor wrote, more ox-like than human and thus the best example for Taylor of the relevance of scientific management. If his system could produce greater productivity at lower unit costs and slightly higher wages with the Schmidts of the world, Taylor inferred, then there existed no rational barrier to the introduction of his techniques on a wider scale. Predictably, Taylor’s account of his success with Schmidt produced an outcry from workers and union officials, who depicted Taylor as an inhumane, driving brute.

It is precisely this image of the man and his ideas that Daniel Nelson seeks to revise. While he recognizes Taylor’s “reactionary views” toward workers, especially those organized in unions, Nelson argues that workers actually occupied a very small place in Taylor’s total system. From the earliest experiments at Midvale, Taylor was concerned with increasing production and revamping an antiquated industrial system and had little interest in or sympathy with other industrial engineers who stressed the labor problem. Indeed, Nelson states that of the five essential components of scientific management that Taylor identified by 1901, those that directly affected workers (time studies and incentive wage plans) consistently received less emphasis than the three that affected management (reorganization of the toolroom, purchasing and accounting methods; creation of a plantwide planning department; and the introduction of the functional foreman with specific, limited tasks). Throughout, Nelson emphasizes that the most persistent resistance to Taylor’s system came less from workers than from top management and the assistants and foremen below them, who opposed the demand that they alter their methods. Not surprisingly, Nelson finds that The Principles of Scientific Management has “little to commend it” as an introduction to Taylor’s thought. Basing his analysis on manuscript drafts, the published text, and Taylor’s lengthy correspondence concerning the work, Nelson argues that Taylor misrepresented his experiments in an effort to make them popular with a wider audience.

Nelson’s Taylor is a more complex and intriguing individual than the one in the traditional account. The evolution of his ideas over the twenty-year period between the Midvale and Bethlehem experiments is explained in detail, and his attempts to ride herd on what often proved to be a fractious group of disciples acting in his name after 1901 is as interesting for what it suggests of Taylor’s personality as for what it implies about the scientific method that supposedly structured Taylor’s system.

Yet the book is not without problems. Nelson’s avoidance of a psycho-historical approach is commendable but leads him to underplay aspects of Taylor’s personal life. The son of a well-to-do Philadelphia family, Frederick Taylor was exposed from youth to his mother’s Quaker religion, her active feminist sentiments, and her strong public stance in favor of the abolition of slavery. Beyond mentioning these facts, however, Nelson refrains from discussing their influence, either way, on Taylor. A similar wooden tone marks the treatment of Taylor’s marriage. Of greater importance is Nelson’s analysis of Taylor as “an unlikely revolutionary” who played a central “role in the transformation of American industry.” Essentially Nelson argues that Taylor was part of the Progressive reform movement that perceived in the scientific method administered by “the politically neutral expert” a way to eliminate “the evils of American society without fundamentally altering institutions and values.” This adaptation of Robert Wiebe’s view (The Search for Order) is provocative but ultimately inadequate. Nelson’s scope is neither as broad nor as comprehensive as Wiebe’s, and Taylor’s “progressive impulse” remains isolated and unexamined in relation to others in that diverse movement. Thus what Nelson presents as the central paradox in Taylor’s life—a lifelong commitment to the “fraternity of mechanics” and the small competitive enterprise—was as his efforts promoted scientific methods and “the large bureau-
critic organization”—is neither as stark nor unique if considered in a larger context. As the work of Wiebe and others has demonstrated, Taylor was but one of numerous reformers during this era who, in their devotion to science, order, and routine as solutions to society’s problems, knew not what they helped to create.

This dilemma is most evident in the treatment of Taylor's attitude toward working people. A major concern of the author's is to rescue Taylor's historical reputation from the critical hands of Braverman and others—and to a limited extent Nelson is successful. Throughout the book Taylor's emphasis on reforming management practice is stressed and Nelson's discussion of the changing role of foremen in Taylor's system is instructive. Yet Nelson's Taylor can never comprehend why workers, especially skilled union men, consistently opposed such innovations as the differential piece rate and the task and bonus system. Repeatedly Taylor complained that worker resistance was caused by management's precipitous introduction of his system, worker ignorance, or combinations of both. For Taylor believed that workers' wages would rise under his plan and since the only object of work was money, the work force, properly educated, would respond favorably to scientific management. The labor problem, he argued, was simply "an engineering problem, a facet of the larger challenge of systematic production management." Taylor believed in economic causation as the key determinant to human behavior and thus was ill-prepared to understand worker resistance. Unfortunately, Nelson does not extend the discussion beyond Taylor's narrow framework and this hinders his rescue of Taylor's reputation. For the skilled workers who protested Taylorism were concerned with wages but they were also men of craft and tradition who were equally concerned with the pace of their daily work routine and the opportunity to express their ingenuity in the process of production. As one leader of the 1911 strike at the Watertown arsenal commented to a Taylor associate: "Our concern is not for the present. As things go now, nothing could be nicer; our concern is for the future."

Daniel Nelson has written an informative book that helps to explain important aspects of Taylor's life. But the analysis of the man, his influence, and the opposition both engendered is too narrowly cast to serve as a final rebuttal to Taylor's critics. By 1923, Nelson writes toward the end of his book, Taylor's reputation was secure and worker opposition to his approach was low: "The unionists had mellowed." Nelson comments. Yet the reader is never informed that this "mellowing" occurred in the midst of the most severe and pervasive anti-union campaign to that date in American history. This omission suggests the limits of Nelson's analysis.

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