

Computerized “Taylorism”

US retail giants utilize software programs to drive productivity

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Taylorism—a theory of management that analyzes workflow to increase productivity—was depicted most memorably in the Little Tramp's frantic and futile attempt to keep up with the "feeding machine" in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. Named for F.W. Taylor, an American mechanical engineer who developed its central concepts in the 1880s and 1890s, the theory was first put into practice in early 20th century factories and rapidly became ubiquitous in large-scale manufacturing.

In order to wring the greatest possible productivity out of a worker in the least amount of time, this system divides a job into its smallest possible units, measures the minimal amount of time and motion required to complete each unit, and then arrives at a standardized, machine-like routine that each worker must follow scrupulously at his or her job. A byproduct of this standardization of the workplace is the transfer of all decision-making from the employees to the managers.

This same system has now been computerized and is being used at more than five-dozen retail chains. The Operations Workforce Optimization unit of Accenture Ltd., formerly known as H.B. Maynard & Co., is providing software programs to giant retailers such as Toys ‘R’ Us Inc., Gap Inc., United Brands Inc., Office Depot Inc., Nike Inc., and Meijer Inc. that borrow heavily from Taylorism. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Operations Workforce Optimization first breaks down jobs into "quantifiable units," arrives at standardized times to complete the units, called "engineered labor standards," and finally writes software to help their retail clients "keep watch over their workforces."

Each employee is expected to achieve at least 95 percent of the baseline score, i.e., successfully complete each engineered labor standard. If an employee fails to reach this goal too many times, he or she will either be moved to a lower-paying job or fired.

Interviews with employees at Meijer stores reveal what one might expect: They feel stressed and insecure in a field of employment that once provided enough security, wages, and benefits to gain a livelihood and raise a family.

Mr. Gunther, a 22-year old cashier at a Michigan Meijer store, "told a longtime customer that he couldn't chat with her anymore during checkout because he was being timed," according to the *Blade* (Toledo, Ohio). His fellow cashiers admitted to avoiding eye contact with their customers for the same reason.

This reporter interviewed Kevin, an 18-year-old college student who works 32 hours a week for \$9.40 an hour as a general warehouse clerk at the Meijer warehouse in Newport, a small town in southeastern Michigan. Kevin's job involves driving a pallet cart up and down aisles to pick up items and deliver them to hi-lo drivers.

Kevin's orders arrive on a sheet of paper with "picks," i.e., items to be picked up, wrapped, and delivered to the drivers within a standardized amount of time. Kevin says there is no tolerance for mistakes, including pickup up the wrong items, and since the warehouse is contracted to Meijer, making a mistake, or not "making rate," often results in termination. Kevin says the turnover rate is "extremely high"; he sees new faces every other week.

This system has had deleterious effects on working conditions at the Meijer warehouse. Kevin related that

the warehouse employs some 500 workers, and that as many as 10 workers at a time drive up and down the same aisle—resulting in delays, not making rate, and the consequences that follow. He also stated that the standardized times pit one worker against the other: "So, if someone needs help for five minutes, I can't."

Kevin offered an anecdote as an example of the stress produced by the program used by Meijer. "When you're finished with your picks you have to get back to the front office and scan your card in time. I remember one time a younger employee was trying to scan his card so he could take his lunch break, and an older worker was trying to 'make rate' and pushed the younger guy out of the way." It's no wonder that an employee with 20 years seniority told Kevin to "finish your schooling and get out of here."

The veteran employee's remark is reflective of conditions existing now in occupations that once offered humane working conditions and decent pay and benefits. The startling figure of 533,000 lost jobs in the November unemployment report, the largest one-month loss of jobs since 1974, includes over 91,000 jobs in the retail sector. In the midst of a severe recession that threatens to become a depression, these losses will no doubt mount, while the retail giants, armed with computerized Taylorism, try to squeeze every last penny out of their remaining employees.



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