Blog 2 - November 2022

Living and working well together: Productivity @ Work

A recent New York Times article reported that 8 out of 10 of the largest employers track employee behavior[1]. The surveillance practice is described as a "productivity tool", while user accounts, have me question the claim. For example, a supervisor responsible for over a dozen employees was not credited for mentoring them because the surveillance system monitoring her rated mentoring as an unproductive employee behavior. Since the Times published the article, we saw Meta's Mark Zuckerberg and Twitter's Elon Musk productivity theories in action.

> *"In a conversation with Insider, a Meta employee said about CEO Mark Zuckerberg's message, 'Zuckerberg's message was very clear. You have three months to prove yourself. Give your 200% effort or if you don't like all this, then resign."*

> *"Twitter's new owner Elon Musk has given employees until Thursday evening to commit to "extremely hardcore" work or else leave the company, according to a copy of a late-night internal email sent by the billionaire and obtained by CNN.*

> *"Going forward, to build a breakthrough Twitter 2.0 and succeed in an increasingly competitive world, we will need to be extremely hardcore," Musk wrote in the memo. "This will mean working long hours at high intensity. Only exceptional performance will constitute a passing grade."*

The Society for Organizational Learning has consistently been led by business visionaries such as Dee Hock and Arie de Geus who warned us of the failures of obsolete management theories and practices.

I believe Zuckerberg and Musk teach us an important lesson. Their demands for "200% effort" and 'extremely hardcore work" by working long hours are not productivity practices but a applied theory of social control. The more widgets/hour you produce the more productive you are. The only problem being productive work is *quality* work. It is not only how much you do per hour and for how many hours – productivity is a measure of the value of your accomplishments.
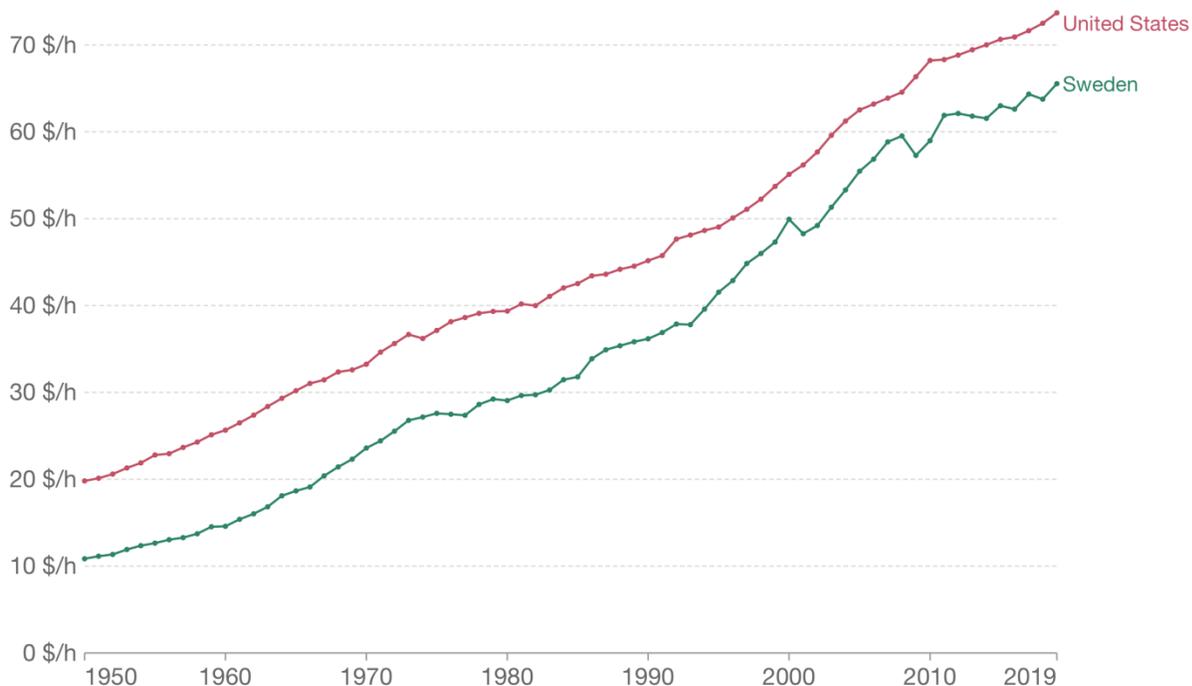
Five defect free products made in 15 minutes is more productive than 100 products made in an hour with 97 rejects.

What is productivity?

This graph shows the growth of productivity of Sweden and the US since 1950. Productivity is measured as gross domestic product (GDP) per hour of work. While the graph is interesting, it's **a difficult measure to use to determine the productivity of individual employees**.

Productivity: output per hour worked

Productivity is measured as gross domestic product (GDP) per hour of work. This data is adjusted for inflation and for differences in the cost of living between countries.

Source: Feenstra et al. (2015), Penn World Table 10.0   OurWorldInData.org/economic-growth • CC BY

The **definition of productivity** established in behavioral research measures employee productivity as **value produced per hour of work**.
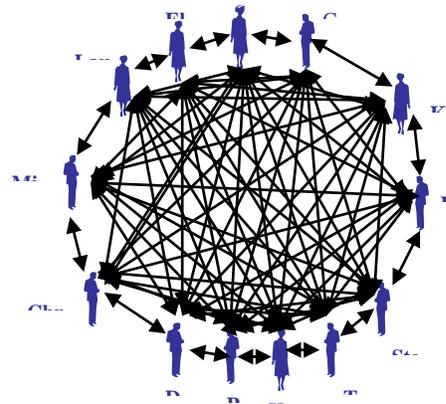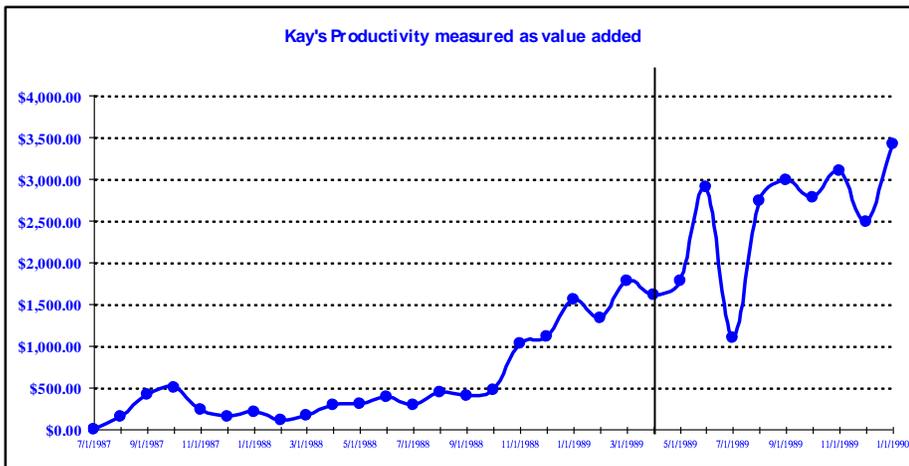
From 1979-1992 I conducted productivity research at the University of Oregon with people with developmental disabilities who had been held in state institutions. We argued that rather than be subject to abuse and neglect in state institutions they could live in communities and become productive citizens. Our productivity data proved our point. We learned that **productivity improved when over 80% of our conversations rewarded employees for their valued accomplishments [1].** See figure below

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[1] It's interesting to note that in 2018, psychologist Martin Seligman listed a*ccomplishments* as one of the five components of flourishing.

Indvidual Productivity

I recruited employees with developmental disabilities who experienced unimaginable abuse and neglect, and when they left the institution to work in our company, they brought forward trauma, depression, medication addiction and post-traumatic stress disorders. It was exciting to learn how work distracted them and eased their pain. The positive culture we created at work improved productivity while painful trauma and PTSD subsided.

In 1990 I was responsible for research studying productivity and the social impact of employees with developmental disabilities at the University of Oregon. In one study, **a professional providing support for new employees with developmental disabilities began facilitating the development of supervisors and coworkers so they could do what she was doing training and support of new employees with developmental disabilities.** In this study, we measured productivity as **value added by individual employees**. The vertical line in the chart below shows the shift from support provided by a single professional to support provided by a network of co-workers that included the professional. Our social network research [2-4] captured the support network while our productivity research [5] measured the support network's impact. The social support network is collaborative, cohesive and self-organizing with everyone in the network seeing everyone else in the network as a contributor. **The support network continuously improved productivity as shown in the graph below.**

Kay's Productivity measured as value added

Productivity: social control or wellbeing?

Returning to the *Rise of the Worker Productivity Score*, a supervisor mentoring and supporting employees and do not effect productivity runs contrary to over ten years of research showing the positive impact of social support networks on productivity.

Perhaps we are witnessing the rise of an old management theory of worker productivity, a theory, without evidence, that assumes management control of workers improves productivity. We need to be careful here. Managing the control of employee behavior can limit their freedom and increase the likelihood of employees having coronary heart disease and ill mental health [6]. As recent as this year, Swedish research reported one in fifteen people working or studying in university settings experienced bullying [7]. Can industrial era management control methods and bullying have a positive impact on productivity? I think the answer is no. In my practice of social action research, I have found that **freedom and the lack of management control are the source of high performance and extraordinary results**. As Humberto Maturana said at the first SoL annual meeting in Amherst, MA

Love expands intelligence, and enables creativity. Love returns autonomy, and as it returns autonomy, it returns responsibility and freedom in us. [8]

A common productivity mistake equates productivity with how many hours are worked per day, or how quickly employees perform tasks. These productivity myths, fail to account for the quality of work done, or valued accomplishments. For example, Walgreens just announced they will end pharmacist evaluation based on speed because they lead to dangerous mistakes [9].

I propose a "do-it-yourself" approach for organizations interested in improving productivity. I begin with senior managers identifying a recent accomplishment they are proud of or excited about. Then I listen to employees tell me how they achieved the accomplishment. Or I ask, *"How do you do what you do when you work well together?"* What comes up again and again? **Themes including freedom, collaboration, support, openness and being recognized for valued accomplishments create a social system of wellbeing and high performance.** Organizations practicing this DIY approach will develop top management's theory of wellbeing that, when applied, will result in high performance and a culture of wellbeing.

Next 2022 blog: Collaboration in social systems

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