

Packet



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Industrial relations and the new technologies

An international perspective

In dealing with matters such as award restructuring and job redesign people are faced with the question of how their job is categorised under one industrial award or how their job fits into the organisation structure of one employer. The structural efficiency principle acts as a guideline throughout Australia. Understandably people focus on the

specific processes related to their job or area of management.

Allen and Unwin, Sydney have just reprinted *New Technology: International Perspectives on Human Resources and Industrial Relations*, edited by Greg J Bamber and Russell D Lansbury. (2nd imp 1990 xx + 267 pp. Paperback. \$24.95. ISBN 0 04 442305 5). The value of this book

is that it looks at major areas of change in work, management and industrial relations from an international perspective. Contributors hail from Australia, Europe and North America. The themes of technological change, flatter organisational structures, multi-skilling, employee participation, productivity, and training recur across the chapters dealing with different countries.

If anything the main title 'New Technology' is slightly misleading for the emphasis of the book is on the adaptation and responses by unions and management to technological change. The authors' introduction skilfully identifies key concepts, theories of management and trade union policies while introducing the following chapters.

Kassalow's chapter on American unions and employers is one of the most impressive of the book. It discusses the end of Tayloristic work organisation methods and the introduction of flexible work forces with limited classifications. The following chapter also looks at the US and discusses how

technological change may be dealt with through collective bargaining.

Chapters four to six deal with industrial democracy and employee involvement with decision-making over changes to the production process. This involves a series of case studies. Chapter seven provides a more comprehensive treatment of this topic. The authors' advocate 'technological participation' and indicate the requirements for this to be successful.

The following two chapters refer to managing change and job redesign. Heller's article on human resource management is crucial to the book's treatment of technology. He explains the limits of technological determinism i.e. the belief that technology can solve everything. The article looks at principles of organisational design and suggests solutions.

The final group of chapters looks at various labour market issues. The chapter on women workers refers mostly to low skill work in service industries. The next chapter on Swedish unions notes their positive attitude towards technological change. They have not feared job losses by seeing that improved productivity would lead to more demand and hence more employment. Certainly the composition and location of jobs changes due to technology.

The last chapter looks at the question of changing skill requirements. It points to the problems of accurately predicting changes. It notes that major changes are occurring in the service industries and in office work. This is interesting given that many of the case studies in other chapters refer to the manufacturing sector. There is a brief discussion regarding skills and training.

My only reservation with the book is the editor's treatment of the relationship of industrial relations and human resource management. Comments in the introduction regarding a move away from industrial relations seem to over simplify some complex changes.

This book is not for the general reader. However, anyone involved in job redesign may find several chapters worthwhile. It would be of most use to those studying industrial relations and human resource management. □

Bias in the workplace continued from 1...

and engineers, are paid at significantly different levels. The librarians at this level earned \$25 000, while the engineers and health and building surveyors earned between \$28 000 and \$30 000, or up to 20 per cent more.

The award for librarians has been historically lower than the awards for other functions because as a group they have lacked the industrial muscle to achieve pay justice. In such instances the role of unions in the development and maintenance of pay inequity has been considerable.

While it is one thing to identify gender bias in remuneration, it is another issue to assess and analyse methods for measuring the inequity, and develop recommendations for implementing a more equitable system. The current surge in the use of job evaluation as an analytical tool to review the work value of positions within various organisations, is the first step in assessing the nature and size of the gender bias problem.

Participation in the analysis and evaluation processes by a wide range of key stakeholders, including management, unions, EEO specialists, consultants, and the position holder, is the first important step in ensuring an objective approach. The description of work in bias-free terms to identify the real responsibilities is a

prerequisite in ensuring accurate results. In overall terms, what is required are equitable perceptions and equitable processes.

One of the biggest difficulties is to convince those people who refute claims of gender bias and its subtleties despite the overwhelming evidence. Only through personal participation in job analysis, job evaluation or remuneration reviews will they experience that bias is real and a major contributor in the determination of work value and remuneration for women in the workforce.

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(Maxine Rochester first drew this article to inCite's attention. It is reproduced, with permission, from Ross's 'Point of View' published in the Sydney Morning Herald, 16 March 1991. The cartoon by Mary Leunig appears by permission of Women and Work, the newsletter of the Women's Bureau, part of the Department of Employment, Education and Training.) □

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