

The World of Work

Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution (roughly between 1740 and 1850) brought some drastic changes to the way people worked and earned a living. Before industrialization work was limited to the agricultural sector with some small-scale craftwork. People usually lived close to their "job" and often the family worked together.

With the invention of the spinning machine, the steam engine and new ways of processing iron the world of work changed. Factories were built, workhouses were established and people moved from the country to the cities. Additionally large parts of society were divided into workers and employees.

Assembly-line production and Automation

Factory-based work introduced a division of labour. Especially assembly-line production introduced by Henry Ford in 1913 split work on a product into different tasks to be carried out by one or more workers. Most factory jobs have been reduced to a few simple, repetitive tasks, i.e. they have been deskilled.

Automation is the replacement of human labour by machines in manufacturing processes. Since the 1970s, computers have increasingly controlled all aspects of production. One result of automation is an increased flexibility in production processes. Unlike earlier generations of machinery, computer-driven tools can be quickly reprogrammed and assembly processes changed to alter products. This flexibility permits rapid shifts to new products, changes in design and, in general, shorter delivery times.

New Technologies and Teleworking

With the advance of intranets in companies and the internet, work has seen yet another major change. These days many people who are employed in the service sector can use computers to work at home and then mail their results to the company. This form of teleworking has advantages and disadvantages. Whereas people have more freedom to choose where and when they want to work, it also requires a high level of discipline and the person is isolated from colleagues unless they meet at video-conferences etc. Companies however can save costs for offices.

Economic Globalization

Globalization refers to the worldwide change on an economic, technological and cultural level. Globalization of the economy is based on international trade, integration of financial markets, movement of capital and migration of people. Companies may find it increasingly difficult to compete on a national level against companies from all over the world. Especially India and China play an increasing role in the global market. Outsourcing is the process of delegating non-core operations from international production to a company in a different country, usually low-wage. Division of labour is thus taken a step further as division of tasks in different countries. Relocation describes

the process of a complete transfer of a company from one country to another, usually "cheaper" country.

Employment / Unemployment

To get a good job people have to have a good school qualification and possibly a university degree. Employers are looking for skilled people by advertising a vacancy either in a newspaper or by finding someone suitable through a job center or agency. Applicants have to send in their letter of application together with their CV and further documents like school reports and references of former employers or teachers. The responsible people in the personnel department invite applicants for an interview. In the job interview the interviewee has to answer questions about his or her experience, interests and expectations about the job. Sometimes the interviewer is accompanied by some psychologists who take notes about the applicant's behaviour. The successful candidate then gets the offer to work for the company and may have to negotiate his or her wage or salary and details of the working conditions. Those who have not been successful have to continue to look for a job in case to avoid unemployment. Most countries pay some kind of unemployment benefit or income support. However, to be on the dole is not easy. For the economy of a country it is of course of advantage to have a low unemployment rate. People usually retire at the age of 65 to 67. Then they can draw their pension.

Trade Unions

The unions are workers' organizations which are concerned with improving various aspects of their members' working lives. Union members often feel that, although as individuals they will have relatively little power, by uniting together they can influence employers.

In the US, unions have generally been concerned with pay and benefits, job security, working hours, and on-the-job health and safety conditions. In Europe, unions have also called for greater worker control over work processes. As well as for a share in profits. One function of unions is to obtain legislation favourable to workers. Another function is collective bargaining, i.e. negotiating with employers on behalf of its members. Any agreements are then legally binding for both parties. In recent years, however, union membership has suffered as a result of job losses due to the globalization of the labour market.

The future of work

To have good chances for employment in the future people need good qualifications. More and more manufacturing tasks are done by computer-controlled machines. Therefore unskilled labour is not available in the extend as it used to be. These days people need to be able to run those machines. Computer-literacy is extremely important. Jobs in the tertiary sector are expected to increase, but not necessarily the income. Because of global competition people have to be mobile and very flexible.