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Working conditions

Amazon A–Z: Deskilling

Deskilling is a process that goes hand in hand with the idea of division of labor, which emerged with the advent of capitalism and mass production and, somewhat paradoxically, with the development of today's advanced technologies. Division of labor was one of the foundations of the industrial age – it became clear then that we needed specialized workers to handle specific stages of production and to operate the machines used in them, rather than craftsmen slowly and independently creating a finished product. But the greatest revolution in thinking about the division of labor was the doctrine of so-called “scientific management,” created by Frederick Winslow Taylor in the late 19th century and later developed by his followers, such as Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, among others.

This doctrine at its peak assumed, generalizing, the division of performed activities into single movements, measured in time and space. On the basis of these measurements, unnecessary movements were to be eliminated, the entire process simplified as much as possible, and the work environment prepared in such a way as to achieve the greatest possible smoothness and efficiency. Thus, not only people had to adapt to the vision of the promoters of “scientific management,” but also their tools. They became simpler to use and their operators, consequently, more easily replaceable.

This last regularity was noticed at the very dawn of the industrial revolution. Fearing the loss of their social position, a group of artisans (called luddites) attacked the first industrial machines in England. According to Gavin Mueller in his book *Breaking Things at Work*, the Luddites did not do it because of their disgust with all progress (as it was later believed). The researcher points out that they were well aware of how much control over the worker the employer had over the industrial machines, which dictated the rhythm of work, and which held the accumulated knowledge and experience, gained by craftsmen over the years. They were easily reproducible and so became their operators, who did not have to possess extensive skills (hence deskilling - “losing skills”), but only the physical ability to cooperate with a given machine.

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Of course, such a vision did not apply to the entire world of work – many occupations, including those considered to be manual labor, still require many specific traits, habits, or experience, e.g. construction work. On the other hand, we all know the stereotypical view from inside a computer or smartphone factory, where devices move on an assembly line (an invention of another Taylorist, Henry Ford) and workers have to perform a task only – like screw in the screws or polish the screen etc.

From the very beginning, technology has contributed to the development of Taylorism and the deskilling that followed it – which can be seen clearly in the functioning of Amazon's warehouses, as well as in the company's patent projects. The movement of goods, and thus indirectly the people who handle them, is constantly monitored, and any deviation from the norm is caught by an automated system. Every step an employee should take is described and suggested by a computer at the workstation, or a scanner in the hand. “ If you don't know what to do, just check your scanner – it'll tell you,” – explains one of the warehouse employees to journalist Emily Guendelsberger, who also worked at Amazon at the time. The author adds from herself: “ Nearly every drop of 'brain work' has been wrung out of this job, like so many others.” As a result, an Amazon employee becomes merely her feet and hands, which are supposed to move an item from point A to point B, fold C box in this way and D box in another. All preconceived by someone else.

And although today we see a huge demand for creative workers – mainly in the field of IT and software development – we can often hear voices recurring about the danger of artificial intelligence entering even such industries, which will automate some of the processes. If that happens, at least some of the creative and middle-management employees will be relegated to the role of helpers of automatic devices. Then, even there, the guiding principle of Taylorism, aptly captured by Guendelsberger, will apply: “As more and more skill is stripped out of a job, the cost of turnover falls; eventually, training an ever-churning influx of new unskilled workers become less expensive than incentivising people to stay by improving the experience of work or paying more.”

What are the stakes of this process? On the one hand, the simple dignity of workers, for whom the ability to make decisions is often an important right, and on the other, the issue of social

inequality. In a world in which more and more jobs will not require specific skills and experience, the salaries of the majority will stagnate, while the profits of the lucky few will skyrocket.

sources:

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3. Karol Marks, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Penguin Classics 1993
4. Gavin Mueller, *Breaking Things at Work*, Verso 2021
5. Richard Salame, *The New Taylorism*, „Jacobin”, 2018