

The Scientific Management of Information Overload

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Examining Frederick Winslow Taylor's seminal work, The Principles of Scientific Management, reveals why many of his ideas were considered controversial. While one might argue against his view of workers' motivation, the principles underlying his efforts towards productivity improvements still apply today. To make a case for the relevance of his contributions for management practice in the 21st century, this article shows first how Taylor's thinking relates to key aspects of lean manufacturing, a popular and contemporary business practice. The coherence of scientific management and lean principles are then further applied to a current and growing problem, information overload, to yield testable propositions for further study. Suggestions for addressing information overload, based on anecdotal evidence, are presented as illustrative.

Many industrial engineers who endeavored to apply manufacturing best practices to professional services firms (Brennan, 2006; Brennan & Orwig, 2000) regularly encountered the types of resistance that Taylor faced: e.g., people are not machines; we have been doing this and know more about how it should be done than you; you are just trying to eliminate jobs, etc.

Taylor's (1911) views of the workers of his day, such as "the workman... is so stupid..." (p. 59), and "almost all tradesmen [are opposed] to making any change in their methods and habits..." (p. 81) have been discredited. However, his methodology did achieve productivity improvements for large industrial concerns, such as The Bethlehem Steel Company. In his extensive biography of Frederick Taylor, Kanigel (1997) gave many examples of the application of scientific management to nonscientific realms, e.g., education, libraries, and home kitchens.

Is this work relevant to management practices in the 21st century? Indeed, it can be asserted that it is quite relevant, in both the manufacturing sector (under the auspices of lean principles) as well as to knowledge work. The following section explains how the principles and practices of scientific management cohere with those of lean