

Are Women in Information Era Jobs Overcoming Industrial Era Barriers? A Study of the Impact of Organizational Characteristics

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Abstract

The knowledge driven, team-based workplace of the 21st Century is redefining work, processes, relationships, cultures, and leadership. A new social contract is being forged with the changing nature of work. This contract requires employees to develop their individual skills, accept personal responsibility, build networks and partnerships, and to seek challenging assignments with creative development opportunities. It is postulated that this social contract reflects the realities of work today. The morphing of the bureaucratic pyramid into the horizontal learning organization has been in response to environmental uncertainty created by forces of globalization, social change, technology, and diversity. While industrial era organizations were built substantially without influence by women these new organizations are being impacted by women as leaders, followers, and outside stakeholders.

Research is needed to answer such questions as: has the impact of women been sufficient to tear down old barriers and create new benefits, have women been effective in shaping the work, processes, relationships, cultures, and leadership in today's organizations, and does the new contract meet the needs of women at work? Answers to these questions require an understanding of the changing nature of work.

Introduction

Benefits and barriers for women at work have changed as the business world has evolved from the industrial age into the information era. There are numerous barriers: gender, socio-cultural, organizational and self-imposed barriers, as well as the opting-out phenomenon, career choices, aging, disabilities, legal effects and the list continues list. Equally importantly, numerous benefits are being reinforced or created. The full impact of this transformative change will take years of research to uncover. But its essence is reflected in the changes of the social contract between society and employers.

The social contract balances societal values with organizational characteristics and it has changed as the economy has evolved from the industrial age to the information era. From the historical perspective, it is useful to remember that large corporations (as well as large non-profits and government entities) are social creations of the twentieth century. The industrial age started around 1750 in England but not until 1840 in the United States. It took the building of the American transcontinental railroads, the invention of the combustion engine, the widespread use of electricity, and similar technological advances to create the economic and social conditions needed to support large scale industrial production and the corporations to manage that production.

Taylor was the first to grapple with the management challenges of these emerging behemoths. In 1911 he published the *Principles of Scientific Management* (Kanigel,1997) laid the foundation for the study of workers, managers and organizations in the industrial era. Over the past century most aspects of organizations and their members have been extensively studied. Beginning around 1975 the globalization of markets and competition, technological innovations, as well as socio-cultural shifts and diversity

signaled the emergence of a new economic era that has been labeled, among other titles, the information age. The forces acting to create this new era made the re-engineering of organizations necessary and the reexamination of the science of management essential. Researchers must examine which changes in organizational characteristics—strategies, structures, technology, cultures and resources—have created benefits for women and which changes have created barriers to the careers of women. They should start by looking at the changing relationship between the citizens in society/employees in organizations (the same people) and their employers as understood by the unwritten social contract that defines that relationship.

The Social Contract

The social contract is forged from the interaction of culture, work, and organizations. This is an unwritten understanding and as such it complex and evolving. The research question is to determine if, while evolving, the social contract has created more benefits or more barriers for women at work. Or more accurately, which barriers have fallen, which have been created, which benefits may be gained and which may be lost.

One version of the social contract holds that in the industrial era, employees were a cog in the organizational machine, they sought job security and to know only what they needed to know about their job. Employers offered traditional compensation packages, standard training programs, limited information and routine jobs. This version states that under the new contract employees expect personal responsibility, improvement and learning that supports employability and to be treated as partners in the business. Employers now expect employees to engage in continuous learning, to respond to incentive compensation, challenging assignments and creative development opportunities; to accept lateral career moves, and to utilize information and resources for the benefit of the employer (Wah, 1998,7; Hall and Moss, 1998,26). An extended variation considers the characteristics of work, managerial competencies, and external forces on an organization. This contract suggests that for today's organizations the key resource is information, work is flexible, even virtual, and workers are empowered and diverse. In the old workplace the key resources were physical assets, work was localized and structured, and the workforce was homogeneous and loyal. Managerial competencies have also changed, leadership is dispersed and is about empowering while in the old workplace it was autocratic; work is done in teams today while previously it was performed by individuals; collaborating relationships are built today while work relationships in the past had been characterized by conflict and competition. The information era focus is on connections and customers instead of profits while corporations are designed as horizontal learning organizations seeking to achieve effectiveness, not the efficient, command and control, bureaucratic designs of the industrial era. Today's digital technology has replaced mechanical technology, global markets now utilize the internet as contrasted to the local and domestic markets of the industrial age; the business environment has shifted from one of stability to one of high uncertainty which is dynamic and complex. Key organizational values that support speed and effectiveness have replaced values supporting stability and efficiency.

Several questions about these changes can be asked:

- Is job security a benefit or barrier for women in mechanistic organizations typical of the industrial age (but still quite common?)
- Is self-improvement and maintaining employability a benefit or barrier in the organic organizations that are increasingly common in the information era?

- Are the traditional compensation packages and standard training programs used in pursuit of a cost leadership strategy barriers or benefits for women?
- Are continuous learning, personal responsibility, challenging assignments and creative development opportunities required in the execution of a differentiation strategy benefits or barriers?
- What are the benefits and barriers to women working with small batch technology?
- Does the mass production technology, common in the industrial age, create more barriers to women than benefits?
- Do women find more opportunities and benefits when working in organizations utilizing continuous process technology?
- What benefits and barriers exist for women in different organizational cultures?
- How is the benefit/barrier ratio affected by different organizational resources?
- Does being empowered in a diverse, flexible and even virtual workforce provide opportunities for women or create barriers to their careers?
- Is a team based work environment built on collaborating relationships more beneficial to women than one of competitive individuals?
- Do women flourish when the focus is on connections and customers instead of profits?
- Are answers to these questions gender specific or are they consistent for both men and women?

This paper will provide an organizational behavior and theory perspective for addressing these questions but extensive research is required to provide definitive answers. Of course, answers to these questions must account for individual differences such as the needs, drives, attitudes, knowledge, experiences, abilities and skills of specific respondents. It must be asked if whether new, and perhaps more difficult, barriers been created. This perspective can be used to create a research framework to answer the fundamental question: is the information era creating a higher ratio of benefits/barriers for women than the benefits/barriers ratio of the industrial era?

The answer to that question requires the resolution of multi-level and longitudinal challenges.

Barriers and Benefits of Work

The benefits of work can be framed in terms of work performance outcomes and barriers in terms of challenges in achieving desired levels of work performance. Work performance is driven by the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes of employees that shape productive, membership, and adaptive behaviors. Performance is not just a function of the individual but also of the opportunity provided by the organization and its deployment of resources (capital: human and financial, information, technology, and input materials.) This context must be accounted for in determining the performance of women in organizations and the benefits they achieve or barriers they face.

Barriers arise from the organization's internal and external environment. Internally, the organization's strategy, structure, technology, culture and resources can frustrate or facilitate employee effort at work. Externally, industry characteristics, the national culture and societal conditions, political and legal systems, economic systems and conditions, and technological factors can create barriers or provide benefits for the organization that impact its internal environment and its workforce. Organizations align their internal characteristics with these external forces and successful organizations achieve a better fit than less successful competitors.

The benefits and barriers at work are reflected in the issues facing managers and employees in today's workplace such as the increased use of temporary employees, the widening separation between core and contingent workers, rapid changes in technology, the growing importance of virtual work, teams, the challenge of achieving a satisfactory work-life balance and the downsizing/ rightsizing of the workforce.

The Nature of Work

The nature of work drives the benefits and barriers available to workers—men and women alike—and the nature of work is determined by organizational and environmental characteristics. Organizational strategies are chosen by management to align the organization (for profit, non-profits, governmental) with its environment. The environment consists of the external and internal components. The external environment includes the indirect impacts from the general environment of economic, socio-cultural, technological, political/legal, and natural factors and the direct forces from the immediate or industry environment arising from existing and potential competitors, customers/clients, suppliers, product alternatives, and industry specific governmental factors and special interest groups. Strategic planners seek to identify opportunities and threats from the external environment and strengths and weaknesses in the internal environment and assess the degree of environmental uncertainty. From this analysis they will adopt a cost leadership, differentiation, or focus strategy (Porter, 1980, 39).

With an appropriate strategy chosen the management team will determine the necessary work technology and structure. Technology may be small batch, mass production, or continuous process (Woodward, 1965, 39) and work flows may be pooled, sequential, or reciprocal (Thompson, 1967, 54-56). Technology must be consistent with the complexity and dynamism of the external environment. There are multiple structural options including the functional, divisional, matrix, team based or virtual forms. The “right” structure is determined by the degree of work specialization, accountability, span of control, empowerment, and formalization that is required to utilize the selected technology and to implement the organization's strategy.

Organizational cultures evolve through the actions of its members. Leaders shape and direct a culture but it can only change as each employee accepts the organization's values and beliefs, as each member alters their own attitudes and expectations. Cultures possess differ layers from basic underlying assumptions, to espoused values, to artifacts (Schein, 1992, 17) and can be a powerful force behind decisions and behaviors.

Several topologies of organizational cultures have been proposed but that of Denison and Mishra (1995, 216) highlight the importance of the environment and strategy. They propose four distinct corporate cultures: the consistency, involvement culture, adaptability culture, and mission cultures. Organizational cultures are strongly influenced by the national culture of the workforce. Organizational cultures are strongly influenced by national cultures which can be identified by the nine dimensions of the Globe study (House, et.al., 2004)

The last factor influencing the nature of work of an organization is the quality and quantity of its resources: human and financial capital, input materials and components, technology, and information. The scarcity of some or all of these resources, in either quantity of quality, sets boundaries on what an organization can accomplish and shapes its strength and weaknesses.

The strategy, technology, structure, culture and resources of an organization define the fundamental nature of organizational work. These characteristics tend to fall into general patterns. In the

industrial era work was done by individuals, in bureaucratic, efficient organizations that existed in a stable and simple environment and were guided by a command and control philosophy that sought to acquire or control all of the resources needed by the organization. Muscles were required, loyalty was expected, and economic rewards were believed to satisfy workers needs. Industrial age organizations are seen as vertical command and control entities that relied upon capital as the primary means to drive production.

In the information era work is generally perceived to be team based in horizontal, flexible learning organizations within complex, dynamic environments that require high levels of communication and coordination. Core competencies and synergy drive lean organizations that demand cognitive skills to utilize telematics (computer and communication technologies) and computer controlled machines. It is accepted that complex reward systems are needed to motivate employees to achieve the effectiveness required to satisfy and balance the claims of multiple stakeholders.

Strategy

Porter (1980, 39) suggested that businesses could pursue one of three competitive strategies. These are low-cost leadership, differentiation, and focus. The focus strategy is to compete in a niche with either a low-cost leadership or differentiation strategy. The low-cost leadership strategy is as the name implies: creating efficient operations and a strong central management team with tight cost controls. This strategy, typical of the large corporations in the industrial era supports a vertical command and control design, relies on routine tasks, tight control, standard procedures and processes, and compliance employees who accept direction. A differentiation strategy requires innovation and creativity, well developed research capability, flexible and empowered employees, and high levels of coordination and lateral communication—characteristic of today's horizontal learning organizations. The knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes required for each strategy are different and therefore individual barriers and benefits will be affected by organizational strategy as well as individual capabilities.

Technology

Work technology encompasses the machines, equipment, tools, methods and procedures to accomplish the tasks of an organization. But in its most fundamental form, technology is applied knowledge. In her groundbreaking book, *Industrial Organization: Theory and Practice*, Woodward (1965), determined that three types of technology dominated the industrial world. Small batch technology is employed where individual workers and craftsmen toiled to produce custom items—cabinets, car repairs, jewelry, houses, etc., or groups of workers performing tasks individually—bank tellers, filing clerks. Mass production technology is that of the assembly line producing automobiles, televisions, and consumer goods of great variety and huge quantities. Continuous processes technology is that seen in oil refineries and chemical plants where raw materials were transformed, using methods and machinery that operated with minimum human input.

Craftsmen were the inheritors of the skills and tools passed down from father to son--often within the systems and attitudes of the medieval guilds--or utilized newly learned skills to resolve problems of modern technological products. Women, through determination or necessity, were in these ranks but this was a man's world. Women did find many job opportunities performing the repetitive, small batch, work of service and back office occupations. Assembly line workers, predominately unionized, were the brawn of the labor forces that created the mass products of an ever improving standard of living. These products reshaped the way we lived, traveled, and learned. Rosie the Riveter did swell the ranks of workers

during the Second War World but she was an interloper into this realm of men manhandling cumbersome and dangerous machines. This technology is typical of the industrial age. Continuous processes were the creation of modern technology itself. The flow of crude oil through a refinery and the increasing automation of factories, bakeries, and laboratories attest to the ever widening application of knowledge to solve industrial problems. This generates an increasing need for higher level skills to perform these complex jobs and requires extensive preparation.

The technological driven company in the information era represents the morphing of the mass production technology into a continuous process technology as everything from television sets to automobiles are produced with fewer and fewer workers and more and more machines, especially computer aided manufacturing processes. Teams of workers in factories and offices control these machines to produce goods and services. It is clear that the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes that lead to high levels of work performance must be appropriate for the technology employed by the organization. The industrial era required honed muscles to control machines. The information age requires trained minds to master machines.

Another aspect of technology is the type of work flow through an organization. Work flows are pooled (as in small batch operations where individual output is aggregated to determine the organization's production); sequential (assembly lines); and reciprocal (team work as in a hospital or the modern factory.) A pooled work flow requires standardized procedures, explicit rules, and a strong command structure. Each job is an independent position, typically requiring physical or cognitive skills, and the employee's output depends on individual knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes. For work to flow smoothly in a sequential process, planning, scheduling, budgeting, liaison roles and unity of command are required. Each job is dependent upon the prior and succeeding jobs and typically requires physical abilities and skills. The employee's output is subsumed into the production process. Reciprocal work flow is flexible, interactive, and requires open communication and information. The work is interdependent and typically requires cognitive and emotive abilities and skills (with a premium on interpersonal and communication skills) and, generally, only limited physical abilities. (Thompson, 1967)

In the industrial era work flows were primarily sequential. Organizations were designed around individual jobs which were grouped into departments and divisions for command and control. In the information era the flow of work through an organization is broken into "chunks", beginning and end points that define a process or product for internal or external customers. This segment of work can be assigned to a team which self-manages the reciprocal work flow and which relies heavily on communication and coordination. As noted in the previous sections, the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes for success in different work flows will vary.

Structure

An organization's structure is established by decisions made about:

- Work specialization as defined by the limits on task variety, significance, and identity. A highly specialized job will be quite limited on these characteristics while a task with low specialization will have considerable variety, significance and identity.
- Accountability is the balancing of authority with responsibility. Authority is a function of the position and not the employee, it decreases as positions are closer to the worker, and it is accepted by employees within a zone of legitimate commands and instructions. Authority is

the delegated right to deploy organizational resources (human, financial, information, technology, and input materials.) An important distinction is made between the authority of those employees directly involved with meeting the goals of the organization (line) and those whose roles are to advise, assist or make recommendations (staff authority.)

- span of control is the number of employees reporting to one supervisor. It reflects the quantity and quality of interactions between the supervisor and his/her subordinates. As required interactions increase in number and importance due to task complexity and dynamism the span of control should decrease. If the qualifications of the supervisor and/or subordinate improve the span of management can be increased.
- empowerment reflects the locus of decision making. A centralized structure pushes decision making to the top of the organization and a decentralized, or empowering, structure encourages decision making at point of problem identification. Top level decision-making is effective in a stable environment for an organization using mass production, sequential technology where routines are established by standard procedures, practices, and policies. Reciprocal work flows and continuous processes require immediate reaction to disruptions arising in a complex and dynamic environment where problems and opportunities cannot be easily anticipated. Effective organizations in the information era empower employees.
- Acculturation reflects the role of shared values, beliefs and expectations in guiding consistent behaviors and decision making in organizations as opposed to utilizing records and documentation of previous decisions and activities to ensure consistency and predictability of behaviors and decisions. An organization with a low acculturation will maintain extensive records and this is a characteristic of the typical bureaucratic organizations in the industrial age. An organization with a high degree of acculturation will rely extensively on its culture to achieve consistency of decision-making and predictability of behaviors.

The industrial age organization typically had a structure with high work specialization, concentrated accountability, a large span of control, low empowerment, and low acculturation. This design is referred to as a mechanistic structure. The information era organization typically has a structure with low work specialization, high, distributed accountability, variable spans of control, high empowerment, and high acculturation.

Line work of the industrial era was primarily physical but in the information era it is primarily cognitive.

Culture

Schein (1992, 12) defines culture as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to these problems.” This emphasizes the role of an organization’s culture as that of facilitating external adaptation and internal integration. Cultures must evolve as the external and internal environment change. Externally, the globalization of markets, competition, and suppliers has forced organizations to adapt. Socio-cultural forces have shaped global and niche markets and given rise to environmentalism; while technological and economic forces have had significant impacts on organizational goals and strategies. Internally, diversity and the changing characteristics of the workforce as well as the expanding capabilities of technology are but two factors that necessitate internal integration.

Organizational cultures have been studied from many perspectives. Denison and Mishra (1995, 216) highlight the importance of the environment and strategy. They propose four distinct corporate cultures: the consistency culture which is effective in a stable environment and with a strategy that is focused on internal forces and resources; the involvement culture has the same focus but functions in an uncertain environment that requires flexibility; the adaptability cultures is successful in an uncertain environment and has an external focus on customers, competitors, and external flexibility; the fourth type is the mission culture with an external focus in a stable environment. Corporate culture is strongly influenced by the national culture of the workforce as found by House, et.al (2004).

The *Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior* (GLOBE) project (House, et.al, 2004) sought to understand cultural characteristics of difference nations. The central concept of the study was that specific cultures are predictive of organizational practices that are most effective and two core propositions were that “societal values and practices also affect organizational culture and practices” and “societal cultural practices are related to the physical and psychological well-being of their members” (House, et.al, 2004, 17-19). The findings of this study demonstrate that organizational cultures and practices are linked to the broader societal culture with impacts on the benefits and barriers to work. Indeed, the researchers treated “cultural dimensions as homologous across levels of analysis” (House, et.al, 2004,75).

The study identified nine principal dimensions that reflect and combine the influences of social, economic, technological, political, and natural forces on each society. These nine dimensions shape organizational behavior and provide insights about challenges and opportunities for women at work.

- assertiveness (aggressive and confrontational in social relationships),
- future orientation (encouraging and rewarding future planning and investment),
- gender egalitarianism (minimizing gender role differences),
- humane orientation (encouraging and rewarding fairness, altruism, and caring through helping others),
- in-group collectivism (Individual pride, loyalty and cohesiveness in families and organizations),
- institutional collectivism (institutional encouragement and rewarding collective distribution of resources and collective actions),
- performance orientation (encouraging and rewarding performance improvement and excellence),
- power distance (expectation and acceptance of power stratification and concentration at top of organizations and governments), and
- uncertainty avoidance (striving to avoid uncertainty through social norms and bureaucratic practices). (House et.al, 2004, 11-13)

One important finding was that cultural characteristics tended to cluster into national groups. The Anglo cluster includes Australia, Canada, England, Ireland, New Zealand, the white sample in South Africa, and the United States. The study found that the Anglo cultural practices “the way things are done in this culture” (House, et.al., 2004, xv) were high on performance orientation, had mid-scores on assertiveness, future orientation, humane orientation, institutional collectivism, gender egalitarianism, power distance and uncertainty avoidance, and had low scores on in-group collectivism. While the cultural values “the way things should be done” were high on in-group collectivism and gender

egalitarianism, low on institutional collectivism and uncertainty avoidance, and mid-score on the remaining five values (House, 2004, 193-194.) From the study “These traits indicate high goal orientation of Anglo societies, where rewards tend to be based on merit and achievement goals take precedence over the family bonds” (House, et.al, 2004) and are typical of industrialized societies built on rationalism and not authority.

Just as organizational cultures evolve, values and practices in the American workplace have also shifted over the last half of a century as our economic has moved from the industrial era to the information era. If values drive behaviors and practices, and if a cultural dissonance exists as a drive to reduce inconsistencies, then insight to the changes in the Anglo cultures can be seen by comparing values to practices. It can be surmised that a movement from practice to values will take place and therefore the cultural pressures are to move from mid to high gender egalitarianism, from low to high in-group collectivism, from mid to low institutional collectivism, mid to low uncertainty avoidance, high to mid on performance orientation. A counter argument can be made that cultural dissonance can be reduced by shifting values to conform to practices. In either case, it should be obvious that cultures will influence the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes of the members of that cultures and that different KSAA will be required to achieve successful work performance in different organizational and national cultures.

Resources

Every organization has its unique combination of resources. The quality and quantity of these resources dictate the limits to the strategic actions of the organization. They define the feasible set of technologies that can be employed, the structures that are most efficient and effective, and these resources shape the culture of the organization. These resources include:

- Human capital resources reflect people in an organization with their individual and collective knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes. This represents the human capital assets available to execute the strategies utilizing the technology, information, and input material resources available to the organization. In the industrial era human resources were commonly considered exchangeable and often expendable. In the information era human resources are generally viewed as vital assets.
- Financial capital is the financial resources available for operational and long-term activities. This is invested in technology, information, input materials and human resources. Capital was the critical resource in the industrial era, hence, the term “capitalist” as the descriptive term of the age. Capital is the accumulated profits resulting from the organization’s productivity—the net difference between the value of the outputs and the cost of the inputs.
- Technology represents the tools, equipment, methods, procedures and practices of doing the work of the organization; it is the resource needed by employees to perform their tasks. Technology encompasses the facilities, land, and ancillary assets needed to properly utilize technology.
- Information is the flow of data that generates the knowledge needed to make decisions throughout the organization. In the information age, where decision making and cognitive work processes determine success it is a critical resource; indeed it is used as a label for this era.
- Input materials are those products, components, or raw materials needed in the operations processes to produce the product or service delivered to customers.

Implications and Future Research

The industrial era was a period of “strong backs and weak minds” with machines dominating the workplace. Men were expected to work as instructed, not to ask questions, and to check their thoughts and emotions at the company gate. If companies wanted higher productivity they could purchase newer machines or speed up the machines that they had on the assembly line. Men shaped the work world in this era; but where were the women? They were homemakers; predominately, but also school teachers, secretaries, waitresses, and all manner of assistants. This highlights the importance of the numerous women who excelled in the sciences, medicine, law, politics, in businesses and communities, but they were the exceptions. Typically, women worked in the front offices in support roles with little chance of earning the high wages of the union jobs. Nor little chance of entering the managerial ranks.

In this technologically driven, knowledge based information era work requires mental capabilities to control machines. Robots and computer aided/controlled equipment are replacing workers in tedious and dangerous jobs. Employees are being hired based on their developed cognitive and emotive skills and their acquired knowledge and experience. You cannot just look at an individual and judge whether they can do the job because physical abilities are seldom the critical factor. In the current workplace a person who has developed critical interpersonal, communicative, language, mathematical, etc. skills will be the top candidate for the job. Women are graduating from college in higher numbers than men and are earning more and more degrees in fields previously blocked or by-passed by women. So, are women facing more or fewer barriers in today’s workplace? Are they finding more or less benefits? Or are the barriers and benefits just different?

This paper sets forth a framework to seek answers to these questions through an understanding of organizational characteristics. It is anticipated that by studying organizational characteristics insights into the opportunities and challenges faced by women in today’s workplace will be gained and that a better understanding of the benefits and barriers faced by women at work will be achieved. It is clear that to fully explore changing barriers and benefits a longitudinal study will be needed.

If industrial era organizations were built substantially without the influence of women and the new organizations of the information era are being shaped by women as leaders, followers, and outside stakeholders then the question of whether or not the impact of women has been sufficient to tear down old barriers and create new benefits can be answered. The answer lies in examining the work, processes, relationships, cultures and leadership in today’s organizations and determining if the new social contract is meeting the needs of women at work.

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