Time and motion management won’t impress customers

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Time-and-motion management won’t impress customers

By Professor Jim Saker

More than 100 years ago, F.W. Taylor introduced the concept of ‘scientific management’. He believed that in the same way there was a best machine for each job, so there was also a best working method by which people should undertake their roles.

Taylor, an American mechanical engineer, suggested the “awkward, inefficient or ill-directed movements of men” were a national loss and that by analysing discrete tasks and using the scientific method it was possible to find ‘one best way’ to perform each activity.

In reality, this involved monitoring the actions of staff and introducing time-and-motion studies that could be used to direct and control not only machines, but also people. Our industry is intrinsically linked to this approach.

Henry Ford is said to have taken these principles and applied them at the Rouge Plant in Detroit. Fordism took the idea of time and motion one stage further by not only identifying the best machines and people, but by bringing the work to the worker with the introduction of the production line. This set the norm for the mass production of cars and to a large extent the car industry as we now know it.

Why is this relevant today? Car production lines have always involved treating people almost as if they were part of the machinery. They have to work at the speed of the line and their tasks are broken down into small, deskillled activities.

When Taylorism was introduced into some American companies, there was an uprising of the workers and numerous strikes. The idea of having highly supervised work processes, with people undertaking repetitive monotonous tasks, has been seen by many as dehumanising and from any Marxist perspective would be regarded as the exploitation of the working class by a capitalist elite.

This issue has raised its head recently in the news with the reaction to alleged working practices in some of Amazon’s warehouses. Channel 4 investigated Amazon last year and reported that staff were made to work long hours with minimal breaks. The staff claimed their movements were monitored by GPS trackers and that they only got 30 minutes for lunch in a 10-hour shift. Amazon allegedly issued penalty points to workers for taking to colleagues, taking sick leave or even spending too long in the toilet on a ‘three strikes and you’re out’ basis. This coincided with reports of the amount of tax paid by Amazon in the UK being less than the grants they were receiving.

With the technology now available, it is possible to monitor the activities of people in almost any working environment. Tracking devices can be put into delivery vans, digital cameras can observe the movements of staff around a showroom, customer feedback can be tracked remotely and the working speed of mechanics can be logged.

The challenge is whether this level of supervision and monitoring is good for the employee and/or the employer. In reality, the retail automotive business has for years practised a form of scientific management, with controlled sales systems requiring the salesperson to follow a routine including a diary system that leads to the making of a number of telephone calls, followed by appointment bookings which then lead to a number of test drives (whether wanted or not). It is no wonder that the level of staff turnover in some dealerships is so high.

If you hire people of poor quality that you don’t trust, you have to have a rigid process to allow them to operate in a way that is felt to be moderately appropriate. The classic example is the ability of companies such as McDonald’s to hire staff and then simply drive them through a process which produces standardised, mass-produced burgers.

The problem for the retail automotive sector is the world is changing. Customers are better informed than ever through access to the internet and social media. Is the ‘scientific management’ and monitoring of sales staff appropriate in a modern era with sophisticated customers? Of course there is a need to supervise, to manage and control, but surely the biggest issue will be in what is actually perceived to be the experience for the customer.

Production lines are good for mass production of products. Customers may be looking for something more personalised, not a mass-produced experience. By over-supervising, not only are salespeople demotivated, they are also restricted in how they are able to react to the customer.

A colleague who works at the university went to buy a new car. She stated at the outset what she wanted and that she didn’t want a test drive. As she was about to leave, the salesperson asked if the manufacturer contacted her, could she say she had been offered a test drive? My colleague said ‘why, I didn’t want one’. The salesperson replied ‘I have to offer it even if I know you didn’t want one’.

Her response was simply ‘Why? There was no response from the salesperson – unfortunately that answer wasn’t in the script.

“Customers may be looking for something more than a mass-produced experience”

Professor Jim Saker is director of the Centre for Automotive Management at Loughborough University’s Business School and an AM Awards judge. He has been involved in the automotive industry for more than 20 years.