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THE WELFARE SUPERVISOR: LESSONS FOR THE MODERN DAY FROM IMPROVEMENTS OF CONDITIONS FOR FEMALE MUNITIONS WORKERS DURING THE GREAT WAR

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ABSTRACT

As part of research into Lessons for Modern Manufacturing and Supply from the Great War the role of the workforce is being examined. This research is based upon an examination of changes in the work place for the workforce brought about by the role of the Welfare Supervisor. The creation of the factory Welfare Supervisor was probably the most important innovation of all. Without her in the workplace to oversee and enforce innovations brought in for women none of the improvements could have succeeded. Unlike so many other initiatives in production her role was only recommended and some factories initially made excuses for not taking on a Welfare Supervisor. Data from 1918/19 shows that this was short sighted, the whole workforce benefitted from the improvements made for women. Where Welfare Supervisors were set on productivity increased and the workforce were happier, healthier and munitions production increased and remained plentiful.

Keywords: Supply Chain, Human Resources, Productivity

1 INTRODUCTION

Wartime munitions production set the clock back as far as hours of work and the liberty of the workforce was concerned. In 1915 comparisons were drawn between the Munitions of War Act of 1915 and the Statute of Artificers of 1563. Yet Mr Lloyd George, in 1916, prophesied “that the making of weapons of destruction should afford the occasion to humanise industry” (HMSO, 1920). He went on to say “effort now being made to soften asperities, to secure the welfare of the workers, and to build a bridge of sympathy and understanding between employer and employed, will have left behind results of permanent and enduring value to the workers, the nation, and to mankind” (HMSO, 1920). How much Welfare work was a reflex action to the war is a good question. The Department of Welfare’s work in the factories was outstanding and the contribution made to the standardisation of principles and practice across the manufacturing industry was enormous (HMSO, 1920).

The workforce were and are a company’s first and best resource. Without them nothing will be manufactured. Improvement in working practice and the working environment increases productivity through a happy, healthy and well looked after workforce. Output was increased by the innovations brought in for female workers because these innovations were rolled out to the whole workforce. Increased munitions production that was required after the shell scandal of 1915 could not have been achieved without the co-operation of the workforce. It is worth, therefore, examining the innovations brought in for women and the role of the Welfare Supervisor within the factories.
The arrival of a female workforce had the effect of altering work conditions for the whole workforce. Not that the presence of women in the workforce was a novelty, working class women had been in the factories since the early days of the industrial revolution. The only people who seemed surprised that women were in the workforce were the press. The differences were their increasing numbers and the type of women coming into the factories; better educated, middle class women were finding their way onto the factory floor. They expected more, were articulate, were aware of their abilities, understood their importance to the war effort and they could be as militant as the men. For some women it was the liberation and independence that they had desired for so long. Indeed, Emily Pankhurst was at this point actively involved in the war effort.

In 1916, the Home Office looked into the welfare conditions of the munitions factories on behalf of the Ministry. Some 1,396 factories employing 200,000 women and girls were divided by the inspectors into three classes. Class ‘A’, 31% of the factories nationwide, Class ‘B’, 49% of the factories and Class ‘C’, 20% of the factories. Class ‘A’ was satisfactory as far as welfare provision was concerned. ‘B’ and ‘C’, either partially or completely, lacked facilities and women and girls were supervised by men. Some of the factories in the ‘B’ and ‘C’ Categories were a long distance away from the workers homes meaning that some had a long journey to and from work. After these inspections, follow-up visits were arranged to make improvements in these factories by Welfare Officers from the Ministry. By 1917 and 1918 the Welfare Officers were stationed in eight areas of the country each with between 400 and 500 factories in their care and supervision (HMSO, 1920).

However, the innovations of canteens, first aid, ambulance rooms, factory nurses, rest rooms, wash rooms, changing rooms, soap, running hot water, drinking water, warm food, decent breaks, protective clothing, transport to and from work and crèches all had to be co-ordinated and supervised. The creation of the factory Welfare Supervisor was probably the most important innovation of all. Without her in the workplace none of the list of work place improvements could have succeeded. The role was the classic Ministry of Munitions remedy that happened time and again. Things worked better if there was someone present to oversee the situation and make those ‘things’ happen. The care of the human material of the factories had to be placed on an administrative level (HMSO, 1920).

Despite the effectiveness of the post the appointment of the Welfare Supervisor was not universally taken up. Initially, unlike so many other initiatives in war-material production, her role was recommended but was not law (the Department, the Welfare Section, did press hard to get firms to make an appointment (HMSO, 1920)) and many factories made excuses for not taking on a Welfare Supervisor. In T.N.T factories it was compulsory to employ a Welfare Supervisor and it soon became practically compulsory in National Factories. Data from the end of the war and 1919 shows that this was short sighted, men soon benefitted from the improvements made for their female colleagues. Where Welfare Supervisors were set on productivity increased and the workforce in general, both men and women, were happier, healthier and less militant. In most cases, where a Welfare Supervisor was set on, the Department received calls from Firms saying how the tone in the factory had changed and describing the advantages of the Supervisor (HMSO, 1920).

The Welfare Supervisors soon became part of the ‘setting on’ system, working with the manager and surgeon in the selection process of new employees. Their role extended to vetting worker’s lodgings, dealing with worker’s transport issues, handling and getting sick pay, helping sick workers and to monitoring attendance by having access to time keeping records and wages books. Often they acted as the un-official ‘morale’ officer arranging dances and concerts at lunch time. The survival of the role and system after the war demonstrated the effectiveness of the Welfare Supervisor. Information from 1919 shows that of 733 controlled factories (out of a national total of 5,603) which sent in returns to the Ministry, 249 were permanently retaining their Welfare Supervisors and 42 were keeping theirs until the women were discharged. The finest post war example of the success of the Welfare Supervisor role was seen in factories in London where the possibility of promoting these women to become factory managers was discussed. Unfortunately, if they were set on as factory managers it was not recorded.
2 WHO WERE THE WELFARE SUPERVISORS?

In 1916, the Department, or Welfare Section, began to press firms to take on Welfare Supervisors. It was not easy to find suitable candidates for this role and at first appointments were made of ‘unqualified’ candidates. Qualifications in teaching, social and administration work were enough to secure the post for the first wave of Supervisors and these qualifications remained desirable for access for the academic and practical course that the Department set up. In March 1916 the Department handled all applications for the post. This was to take the burden away from the employers and to set a centralised, standard qualification for the post. Courses were set up and the length of the course varied from three to twelve months depending upon the needs and qualifications of the student. The courses, run at most of the national universities, were based around a curriculum that contained industrial law and history, economic theory, and industrial hygiene. Students were also given the opportunity to experience the practical side of the problems of working class life and factories conditions. In 1918 it was demanded that the training should also include knowledge of trades union aims and methods. As time went on the role of Welfare Supervisor, with its different grades and own hierarchy, supported by university study and accreditation, practically became a brand new profession for women (HMSO, 1920).

Welfare Supervisors varied as widely as the interpretation of the term ‘welfare’. In the first year of the Welfare Section the Supervisors met with a good deal of misunderstanding. Initially their work was ill-defined and appointments were often made under departmental pressure. Existing managers, foremen and forewomen mistrusted another new supervisory role that might impinge upon their authority. In some cases men were not happy to defer to a woman, let alone a woman unused to factory life. Workers themselves were suspicious at first, seeing the new Supervisor as another ‘gaffer’. In most cases opposition vanished in practice and time. A Welfare Supervisor depended upon her own ability and in the position assigned to her by the factory management to succeed or fail. Where her role was ill-defined there were problems; where it was well understood and supported it worked. Fortunately in most munitions factories, especially the national ones, her role was very well defined and supported (HMSO, 1920).

In some instances, in the early days, a nurse or two would be set on. In small concerns Welfare Supervisors were often promoted charge-hands who added to their tasks the jobs of looking after the first aid kit and the messroom. At the other end of the scale, in major factories they were the “Lady Superintendent”. She was very much part of the hierarchy and embedded in the factory set up. Reporting to the directors and the general manager she was recognised as the authority on all welfare matters, she had staff that reported directly to her (HMSO, 1920). The most famous of these Superintendents was Lilian Barker, known as “Good old Lil” but who had to endure a good deal of opposition from the men and women when she first started at Woolwich Arsenal. In some cases the Welfare Supervisors were initially considered to be management spies and protagonists of class warfare. It was true that in most cases the Welfare Supervisor was an upper or middle class ‘lady’ but only because educated women were needed for the role. Upper and middle class ladies tended to be educated (Mitchell, 1966).

Lilian Barker was neither of these, she was born into poverty in Kentish Town, apprenticed as a florist and then became a teacher. She gained a reputation for working with slum children abandoned by the school system. By 1914 she had a reputation for being a miracle worker who, through her personality and dislike of convention sought to expand the knowledge and experiences of her slum girls. She was not a suffragette, she was not a socialist, she loathed injustice and sought to transform the lot of the human casualties of British industrial power. Lilian, like many of her colleagues, endured graffiti chalked on walls, mistrust and insolence on the shop floor. Taking unpopularity as their lot the Welfare Supervisors persevered in much the same way that officers were expected to do at the front. They pushed themselves hard and worked longer hours than their charges. They also looked after their charges, in Lilian’s case ‘like a benevolent hawk’ (Mitchell, 1966). They organised clubs, concerts, saw to it that the girls could bring their boyfriends, organised effective childcare, raised money for trips to the seaside and to open convalescent homes for injured and sick workers. Lilian defended the rights of pregnant Arsenal girls. If
they were to be sacked for being pregnant she said, then so too should the father; if he was also an
Arsenal employee. Leading the workforce by example worked.

Welfare Supervision was first described by the Health of Munition Workers’ Committee in December
1915. It was further embellished in 1916. The Supervisor’s general duties are laid out in Volume V:
1/ The selection and rejection of candidates for employment, or the preliminary sifting of such
applicants before passing them on to the foreman or forewoman for engagement on technical
grounds.
2/ The supervision of the women’s accommodation, including canteens, messrooms, cloakrooms,
etc., and the engagement of their staffs.
3/ The general supervision of the discipline of the women, either personally or through forewomen
or cloakroom matrons, on day shift or night shift.
4/ The supply and upkeep of protective clothing.
5/ The investigation of workers’ complaints.
6/ Inquiry into absenteeism and bad time-keeping.
7/ Inquiry before dismissal of a worker.
8/ Care for the workers’ health, especially in regard to ventilation, lighting, heating and cleanliness
of the shops, the lifting of heavy weights, and the effects of long hours of work.
9/ The supervision of first aid treatment by the factory nurses, if there was no factory doctor, and the
administration of first aid treatment if there was no nurse (HMSO, 1920).

While all of the above were aimed at women and girls all of these duties, with perhaps the exclusion
of point 3, would benefit the men and boys. The men were often older and therefore past their prime or
were wounded soldiers no longer fit for the front line or boys, many of whom would not be fully
developed, so points 8 and 9 would also be pertinent to them.

In 1917 with a year’s worth of experience and data the role of the Welfare Supervisor was further
defined in this Ministry of Munitions circular.

The duty of a welfare supervisor is to obtain and maintain a healthy staff of workers, and to help
in maintaining satisfactory conditions of work. She should, it stated, on these grounds undertake
the selection of the staff (with reference, if possible, to the certifying surgeon or panel doctor), the
supervision of working conditions, of the canteen (probably in consultation with the trained
manager in charge), of the ambulance, rest room and first aid apparatus, of cloakrooms and the
supply of overalls. She should, finally, be in touch with “the relation of health to efficiency” by
access to the wages books and the time office, and by keeping records of ambulance cases and
accidents (HMSO, 1920).

Even so in many factories the role of the Welfare Supervisor remained un-defined. She could spend a
great deal of her time dealing with complaints and working with the trade union secretary to remove
friction in the workplace. By involving herself in workers’ illnesses she entered the realm of ‘human
relationships’. After the Welfare Supervisor had addressed the “obvious and immediate needs” (HMSO,
1920) of the workforce some firms picked out specific welfare areas that they wished to be attended to.
In some factories where dangerous work was undertaken worker’s health would be highlighted, in others
the social aspect of working and leisure life could be at the fore, in others the emphasis could be placed
upon the taking on of the right staff. In the latter she was expected to be business like in her dealings with
the women in her care and to try to reduce changes in personnel. Reasons for absenteeism and poor time
keeping were investigated and addressed by her (HMSO, 1920). The range of the Welfare Supervisor’s
duties was elastic.

3 HOW DID WELFARE INNOVATIONS BENEFIT THE WORKFORCE AS A WHOLE?

Incredibly there appears to have been no specific effort to cater for the welfare of men in the workforce.
Any complaints about accommodation made by men were addressed to and by the Welfare Section.
Volume V states that “formal complaints were, however, seldom made, either by individuals or by labour
organisations.” (HMSO, 1920). Any that were made referred to “details” about canteen management or
heating. The latter caused a series of small strikes during the fuel shortage of 1917-18. These issues were
dealt with by the Committee for Production but by and large the issues of difficult and unhealthy
conditions were dealt with by offering the men higher wages rather than improving things physically or
practically (HMSO, 1920).

“No definite demand appeared to exist among workmen during the war for a general improvement of
working conditions.” (HMSO, 1920). Because they had no need to ask. The work being carried out by
the female Welfare Supervisors for the female workforce was improving the lot of the men. There were
male Welfare Supervisors but they were not in the same league as their female counterparts. While the
female Supervisors were expected to be business like with their women the male Supervisors were
expected to be chummy with the men. If a recreation club was set up he was expected to run it. He was
expected to be the secretary of the Men’s Committee or Works Council (HMSO, 1920). He was meant to
be ‘in there’, working and socialising with the men. He does not seem to have had the many and elastic
duties of the female Welfare Supervisor. Volume V does admit that the male workforce in munitions
factories enjoyed the advantages of messrooms and first aid originally introduced for the women.
Innovations such as the messrooms and first aid had to be shared and so too did others. It would be
impossible to have entirely ‘women only’ benefits. The men, militant as they were, would have staged
industrial action if they thought that women were getting a fairer deal than them surely?

CONCLUSION

Unions initially feared the welfare reforms, considering them a form of separatism that emphasized a
firm’s relationship with single workers rather than a collective. Nevertheless Welfare Supervisors had to
help and train a population of young and often irresponsible workers who had no notion of collective
factory work. The Welfare Supervisors often managed to inculcate their young charges with the kind of
collective esprit de corps which in turn created a sound platform for strong trade unionism (HMSO,
1920). After the initial suspicion was overcome there was little friction between the Welfare Supervisors
and the Unions because their tasks were at once related and distinct. The care and wellbeing of the
workforce was at the core of both remits. The unions were strengthened and the entire workforce
benefited. Union membership in 1913 was 4,189,000 and in 1919 it was 8,081,000 (Mowat, 1955).

When the women were sacked as soldiers returned or the factories closed, the women, if they could,
returned to smaller companies or service and took with them the principles of welfare at work. Their new
workplaces benefited from their considerable experience and expertise. It was the same for men. Both
men and women took with them an experience of welfare at work which had indirect social benefits for
society as a whole in post war Britain (HMSO, 1920).

Of course welfare at work, overseen by the Welfare Supervisor was there to improve productivity of
the workforce. An unhealthy, unhappy, overtired and overworked labour force was not a productive one.
Shell production continued to improve and increase after the scandal of 1915 and the setting up of the
Ministry of Munitions. Standardised shells were manufactured and sent along the supply chain from
factory to the front line in increasing numbers. The guns on the Western Front (not to mention operations
in other theatres of war throughout the world) were fed for the Somme, Arras, Cambria, Passchendaele, to
defend during the German 1918 Spring Offensive and The 100 Days; as well as the usual, daily, barrages
and bombardments that trench warfare demanded. There were no more shortages and by March – April
1917 the gunners at Arras were begging the ordnance troops to send no more shells; they had nowhere to
store them.

Welfare work provided a level of comfort in National Factories and Government Establishments.
Canteens, rest rooms, ambulance rooms and comforts provided by Welfare work and overseen by Welfare
Supervisors benefited 400,000 women and girls, 1,250,000 men and 250,000 boys by the end of
hostilities (HMSO, 1920). Welfare work was a demonstration of state socialism where cocoa and milk
drinks and the value of suet pudding, the price of boxing gloves and hockey sticks, children’s swings, the
right type of overalls, soap, a decent sink, the advantage of a crèche, frequent trains, trams, buses and
ferries and decent accommodation all had their place in the improvement and humanisation of the
workplace and workforce (HMSO, 1920). The job was to make sure that the production of shells was effective, optimised and achieving monthly government targets to provide the required munitions to kill as many enemy combatants as possible.

REFERENCES