

A PRELIMINARY EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF SPECIALIZATION OF LABOR AT THE WORKPLACE: THE VIEWS OF PRODUCTION MANAGERS IN LEBANON

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ABSTRACT

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“Specialization is for insects, diversification is for humans”. Horizontal division of labor is based on specialization of work. The basic assumption underlying horizontal division of labor is that by making each worker’s task specialized, more work can be produced with the same effort through increased efficiency and quality. However, no known studies in Lebanon were conducted to investigate the implications of specialization of labor at the workplace. This survey studied the attitude of the production managers in Lebanon towards the specialization of labor, in general, and the consequences of the implementation of specialization at the workplace, in particular. An exploratory survey was conducted using a 17-item questionnaire with 20 production managers. It was concluded that the attitude of the production managers in Lebanon toward the specialization of labor, in general, and the consequences of the implementation of specialization at the workplace, in particular, cannot be considered completely positive; specialization offers advantages and disadvantages for both the management and the labor. Moreover, production managers are hesitant to implement specialization concept in an unpredictable environment like Lebanon; they recommend a flexible specialization.

Keywords: specialization of labor, division of labor, organization design and structure, mass-production.

INTRODUCTION

Organizing is basically a process of division of labor. Labor can be divided either vertically or horizontally. Vertical division of labor is based on the establishment of lines of authority and defines the levels that make up the vertical organization structure. On the other hand, horizontal division of labor is based on specialization of work (Niederhoffer, 2006). The basic assumption underlying horizontal division of labor is that by making each worker's task specialized, more work can be produced with the same effort through increased efficiency and quality (Hicks & Gullet, 1981). Specifically, horizontal division of labor, or specialization of labor, can result in many advantages: fewer skills are required per person; practice in the same job develops proficiency; more conformity in the final product results when each piece is always produced by the same person (Pierce & Gardner, 2002). However; there are also few problems with specialization of labor, or horizontal division of labor. In fact, specialization may result in job boredom and even degradation of the employee. Once employees become bored, their productivity often declines, absenteeism and tardiness increase, and the quality of work goes down (Jaffe, 2001). Some solutions are offered in this case; for example, implementing job rotation; reexamination of job scope which refers to the number of different types of operations performed on the job; and balancing job simplification with job depth which refers to the freedom of employees to plan and organize their own work, work at their own pace, and move around and communicate as desired (Palmer *et al.*, 2006).

It is obvious that specialization and division of labor has many implications at the workplace. It has many consequences on both the employees and the work process. However, the researcher found there is a lack of exploratory study with respect to the attitude of the production managers in Lebanon towards specialization of labor in general, and the consequences of the implementation of specialization at the workplace, in particular. This study raised the following question:

1. Do production managers in Lebanon have a positive attitude towards the specialization of labor?
2. Do production managers have a positive attitude towards the consequences of the implementation of specialization of labor at the workplace?

METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted with 20 production managers, using a 17-item feedback form, to gather some statistics concerning the attitude of the production managers in Lebanon towards specialization of labor in general, and the consequences of the

implementation of specialization at the workplace, in particular. For this purpose, the questionnaire was divided into 3 sections:

- General information section about the production managers and their background.
- Comprehensive section containing questions related to the attitude of the production managers towards specialization of labor.
- Practical section containing questions to evaluate the attitude of production managers towards the consequences of implementing specialization of labor at the workplace.

Moreover, different questions format were used in the questionnaire. It contained 'Yes' or 'No' questions, multiple choice questions to narrow the answers into few options, open-ended questions to give a chance for the managers to give their opinions freely, and Likert-scale questions to allow the interviewees to provide feedback that is slightly more expansive than a simple close-ended question, but that is much easier to quantify than a completely open-ended response. Finally, some questions were cross questions intended to check the credibility of the answers.

This survey was conducted with only production managers. The questionnaires were distributed to 23 managers and filled by only 20. They were chosen randomly from different manufacturing companies, different geographical locations, and different industries.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This survey studied the attitude of the production managers in Lebanon towards specialization of labor in general, and the consequences of the implementation of specialization at the workplace, in particular. After analysing the outcomes of the questionnaire, it was obvious from the answers to the first question that the majority (55%) of the production managers think they were hired because of their managerial skills; only 20% of them think they were hired because of their specialization (Refer to Figure 1).

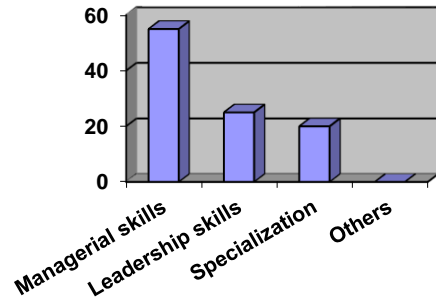


Figure 1. Response to the question “Why do you think that you were hired as a production manager?”

In response to the question related to hiring a production manager assistant, the answers were 60% for hiring on the basis of specialization, and only 25% on the basis of the managerial skills and 10% for the leadership skills. As for the question related to the famous saying: “*specialization is for insects; diversification is for humans*”, 55% of the interviewees disagreed while 25% agreed and the remaining 20% neither agreed nor disagreed (Figure 2).

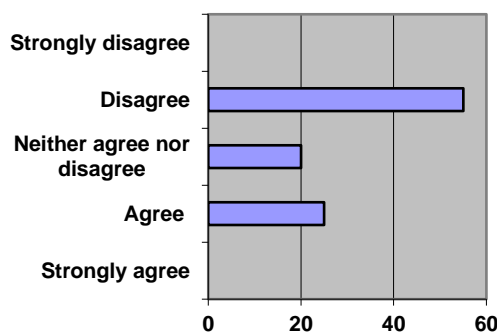


Figure 2. Response to the question whether “Specialization is for insects, diversification is for humans”.

When the project managers were asked if they would implement the concept of specialization of labor at their companies, 55% replied by a “Yes” while 45% answered by a “No”. Moreover, some of the interviewed production managers commented that specialization of labor wasn’t feasible in their case and that it is not very practical in

Lebanon because it is an unpredictable environment where employees should learn to do everything so they are always ready for the worst.

Furthermore, for the practical section of the questionnaire, 11 questions were included in a Likert-scale format. For the questions related to training and recruiting under the specialization of labor structure, the results were as follow: 75% of the interviewees agreed that training under the specialization concept is faster, and 55% of them replied that it is easier for the management to recruit if they are following specialization of labor strategy at the workplace (Figure 3).

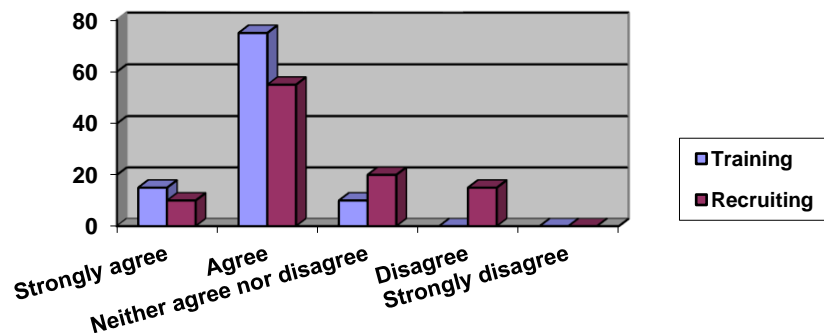


Figure 3. Response to questions related to training and recruiting under the specialization of labor strategy.

Concerning the 3 questions related to the advantages of the specialization of labor, the answers varied from one question to the other. In fact, 80% of the interviewees strongly agreed that specialization will result in high output due to the simple and repetitive work. On another hand, 70% also strongly agreed that specialization will result in low wages due to ease of substitutability of labor, while only 65% strongly agreed that specialization of labor will provide a close control over workflow and workloads. More details are presented in Figure 4.

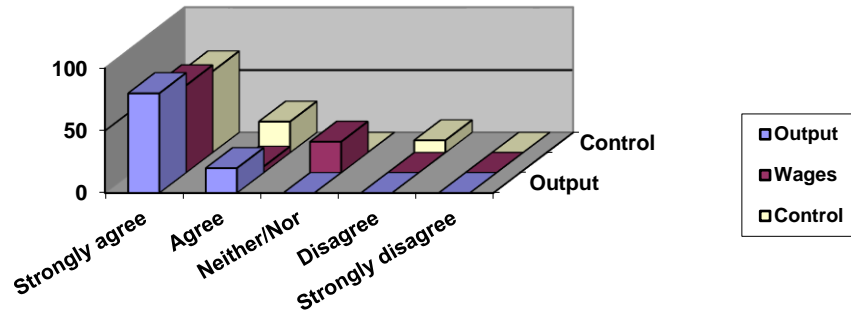


Figure 4. Response to questions related to output, wages, and control.

In addition, when the production managers were asked if they agree that specialization will cause a great difficulty in controlling quality since no one person has responsibility for an entire product, only 10% agreed, while 30% disagreed and 60% neither agreed nor disagreed (Figure 5). In fact, the managers commented that there are different ways to control the quality of the product other than through human interface.

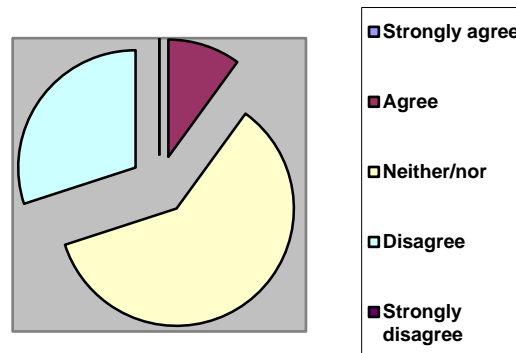


Figure 5. Response to the questions related to the control of the quality of the final product.

Moreover, for the question related to the worker dissatisfaction with all its implications in the case of the implementation of specialization of labor, 50% of the production managers disagreed and 40% agreed. These managers said that there are many reasons for dissatisfaction and many other reasons for the satisfaction of the workers at the workplace. In fact, 60% refused to link worker’s dissatisfaction to the specialization of labor concept.

Concerning the question whether if specialization of labor will lead to a limited flexibility to change the production process to produce new or improved products, 65% agreed, whereas only 10% of the production managers answered by “Neither agree nor disagree”. As for the question on whether if little or no education are required to obtain work in the case of specialization of labor, 45% of the production managers disagreed stating that nowadays education is very necessary even for the simplest tasks. However, 35% agreed that labor education is not needed in case of specialization.

The last 2 questions related to some of the direct impacts of specialization on the labor, 85% of the production managers replied that they strongly agree that specialization will cause boredom to the employees because of the repetitive nature of the work; and 75% of the interviewees strongly agreed that little opportunities will be given to a better job since significant learning is rarely possible on fractionated work (Refer to Figure 6).

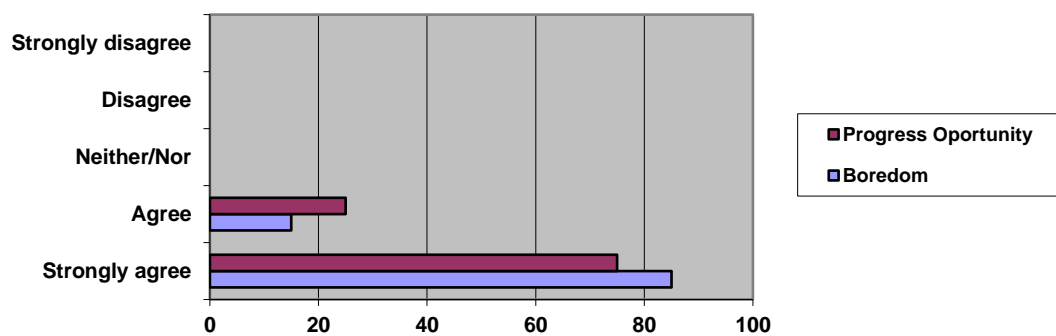


Figure 6. Response to questions related to boredom and progress opportunity.

The attitude of the production managers in Lebanon toward the specialization of labor, in general, and the consequences of the implementation of specialization at the workplace, in particular, cannot be considered completely positive. In fact, those production managers interviewed believed that specialization of labor can be beneficiary in some particular cases, offering some advantages, like high output and close control over workflow; but on the other hand, specialization might offer also some disadvantages for both the management and the labor, like worker boredom and dissatisfaction leading to hidden costs, or little opportunity for professional development. Moreover, the project managers believed that the higher levels will require additional skills, other than specialization, such as managerial and leadership skills.

What was surprising, however, was that although the majority of the interviewed project managers disagreed with the saying that “Specialization is for insects; diversification is for humans”, most of them encouraged and emphasized the importance

of diversification and they totally related it to the unpredictable environment found in Lebanon where employees and management should always be ready for the worst. Therefore, they consider that one of the contingency plans can be to have a broad and more generic job description than to have a narrow and very specific and specialized job description. In fact, the production managers encouraged the implementation of a flexible specialization.

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