

Chapter 6.13

High-Tech Workers, Management Strategy, and Globalization

Jasmine Folz

Seattle Central Community College, USA

ABSTRACT

Based on qualitative interviews with Seattle area high-tech workers, this chapter explores their positioning within and reaction to globalization processes. Looking especially at cost-cutting labor strategies of contingent employment, importation of foreign workers, and the outsourcing of professional high-tech work, it is argued that these are essentially restrictive employment strategies that benefit employers at the expense of employees. While some of the interviewees more or less approved of these practices as logical from the corporate perspective, and were confident that their jobs were too complex to be at risk, most are questioning these processes and some were actively trying to organize in an effort to halt or at least slow down such trends. How and why high-tech workers accommodate or resist management policies and practices they disagree with is analyzed with attention to the impact of ideology.

INTRODUCTION

The rapidity and scale of technological innovations during the last century has contributed to a great transformation in the labor process that continues to change the nature of society in general and work in particular. Information can travel and be processed faster than ever before, and this allows for the reorganization of corporate entities with respect to both time and space. Many have interpreted these changes and shifts as the inevitable and indeed desirable result of “globalization” in which the breaking down of political and economic barriers is paired with the blurring of cultural identities. Attention to globalization has produced many valuable contributions to the anthropology of work in particular, ranging from ethnographies of how transnational production practices shape the lives of people working in the mines, factories, and “information sweatshops” of developing nations to studies of how blue collar workers in de-industrialized America have

experienced these same processes (Doukas, 2003; Ferguson, 1999; Freeman, 2000; Nash, 1989, 2001). How, though, do the relatively elite workers who create the technologies that facilitate these practices experience globalization?

Drawing from qualitative interviews with eleven high-tech workers conducted in Seattle, WA in 2004, I examine high-tech work and workers as embedded in the international political economy. In their day-to-day experiences, as well as in the moments and factors that define their careers, individual high-tech workers confront and negotiate a myriad of macro level issues, including changes in technology, market fluctuations, political regulations and policies, and off-shore production. Though these issues may appear much larger and thus separate from individual high-tech workers, these macro level changes do affect the high-tech workers I interviewed in very tangible ways. To better understand this macro-micro relationship, I analyze issues associated with globalization that were brought up in the interviews, looking particularly at high-tech production and labor processes and at how the workers I interviewed accommodate or resist globalization as it is manifested in management policies and practices.

GLOBALIZATION AND HIGH-TECH PRODUCTION CYCLES

Much of what concerns contemporary ethnographers are the issues surrounding globalization, and, more specifically, the negative consequences globalization has had on many people in traditionally as well as newly marginalized spaces. Indeed, globalization is this moment's answer to what Wolf calls the "central problem" inherent to each period of anthropology (1972, p. 252). Though from an anthropological perspective, globalization, as defined by the interconnectedness and exchange of world cultures and economies, is not new, what is new is the speed and scope at which

technology is shrinking the relationships between time and space. From processing information in "data factories" to working in cyberspace, location of work and workers has shifted and new sites and categories of work have emerged. The implications of these transformations for high-tech workers, their managers, and the global labor process are certainly significant, though they are also significantly contested. Within the American context, two issues exemplify the role of high-tech workers in the globalization process: flexibility and accommodation as management strategies and the high-tech production process.

Advances in computing networks, transportation, and telecommunications have allowed corporations to become more flexible and take greater advantage of economies of scale. This flexible business model, which is facilitated by neoliberal policies, favors the decentralization of production framed within correlating shifts in time and space, or shifting spaces. Harvey's analysis of the shift from the assembly line logic of industrial capitalism (Fordist) to the post-Fordist logic of flexibility and accommodation that now dominates global production is useful here for, as he explains:

The primary significance... of all these changes is that the relatively privileged position of the working classes in the advanced capitalist countries has been much reduced relative to conditions of labor in the rest of the world... The secondary point is that conditions of life in advanced capitalism have felt the full brunt of the capitalist capacity for 'creative destruction' making for extreme volatility of local, regional, and national economic prospects... (2000, p. 69)

Thus, the globalization process and, in particular, the management strategies of requiring flexibility and accommodation from employees, define the circumstances and constrictions of high-tech work/workers. While on the one hand high-tech workers can embrace unprecedented

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