

8.20: The Hawthorne Studies

Learning Objectives

- Describe the Hawthorne effect
- Explain the role of the Hawthorne effect in management

During the 1920s, a series of studies that marked a change in the direction of motivational and managerial theory was conducted by Elton Mayo on workers at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company in Illinois. Previous studies, in particular Frederick Taylor's work, took a "man as machine" view and focused on ways of improving individual performance. Hawthorne, however, set the individual in a social context, arguing that employees' performance is influenced by work surroundings and coworkers as much as by employee ability and skill. The Hawthorne studies are credited with focusing managerial strategy on the socio-psychological aspects of human behavior in organizations.

The following video from the AT&T archives contains interviews with individuals who participated in these studies. It provides insight into the way the studies were conducted and how they changed employers' views on worker motivation.



You can [view the transcript for "AT&T Archives: The Year They Discovered People"](#) ([opens in new window](#)).

The studies originally looked into the effects of physical conditions on productivity and whether workers were more responsive and worked more efficiently under certain environmental conditions, such as improved lighting. The results were surprising: Mayo found that workers were more responsive to social factors—such as their manager and coworkers—than the factors (lighting, etc.) the researchers set out to investigate. In fact, worker productivity improved when the lights were dimmed again and when everything had been returned to the way it was before the experiment began, productivity at the factory was at its highest level and absenteeism had plummeted.

What happened was Mayo discovered that workers were highly responsive to additional attention from their managers and the feeling that their managers actually cared about and were interested in their work. The studies also found that although financial incentives are important drivers of worker productivity, social factors are equally important.

Practice Question

<https://assessments.lumenlearning.co...essments/14428>

There were a number of other experiments conducted in the Hawthorne studies, including one in which two women were chosen as test subjects and were then asked to choose four other workers to join the test group. Together, the women worked assembling telephone relays in a separate room over the course of five years (1927–1932). Their output was measured during this time—at

first, in secret. It started two weeks before moving the women to an experiment room and continued throughout the study. In the experiment room, they were assigned to a supervisor who discussed changes with them and, at times, used the women's suggestions. The researchers then spent five years measuring how different variables affected both the group's and the individuals' productivity. Some of the variables included giving two five-minute breaks (after a discussion with the group on the best length of time), and then changing to two ten-minute breaks (not the preference of the group).

Changing a variable usually increased productivity, even if the variable was just a change back to the original condition. Researchers concluded that the employees worked harder because they thought they were being monitored individually. Researchers hypothesized that choosing one's own coworkers, working as a group, being treated as special (as evidenced by working in a separate room), and having a sympathetic supervisor were the real reasons for the productivity increase.

The Hawthorne studies showed that people's work performance is dependent on social issues and job satisfaction. The studies concluded that tangible motivators such as monetary incentives and good working conditions are generally less important in improving employee productivity than intangible motivators such as meeting individuals' desire to belong to a group and be included in decision making and work.

? Practice Question

<https://assessments.lumenlearning.co...essments/14429>

Contributors and Attributions

CC licensed content, Original

- Revision and adaptation. **Authored by:** Linda Williams and Lumen Learning. **Provided by:** Tidewater Community College. **License:** [CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike](#)
- Practice Questions. **Authored by:** Nina Burokas. **Provided by:** Lumen Learning. **License:** [CC BY: Attribution](#)

CC licensed content, Shared previously

- Boundless Management. **Provided by:** Boundless. **Located at:** <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-management/>. **License:** [CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike](#)

All rights reserved content

- AT&T Archives: The Year They Discovered People. **Provided by:** AT&T Tech Channel. **Located at:** <https://youtu.be/D3pDWt7GntI>. **License:** *All Rights Reserved*. **License Terms:** Standard YouTube license

Public domain content

- Hawthorne Works. **Provided by:** Western Electric Company. **Located at:** https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hawthorne_Works_aerial_view_ca_1920_pg_2.jpg. **License:** *Public Domain: No Known Copyright*

8.20: The Hawthorne Studies is shared under a [not declared](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

- 23.3: The Hawthorne Studies has no license indicated.