

Changes in the Western Workplace

Conditions in the working environment of Western countries changed significantly over the 20th century. Though not without some associated problems, these changes may be viewed generally as positive: child labour all but ceased, wages rose, the number of working hours in a week decreased, pension policies became standard, fringe benefits multiplied and concerns over health and safety issues were enforced.

The collection of data relating to work conditions also became a far more exact science. In particular, there were important developments in methodology and data gathering. Additionally, there was a major expansion of the data collection effort – more people became involved in learning about the workplace; and, for the first time, results started to be published. This being the case, at the end of the century, not only were most workers better off than their early 20th century predecessors had been, but they were also in a position to understand how and why this was the case. By carefully analyzing the statistical data made available, specific changes in the workplace - not least regarding the concept of what "work" should involve - became clearly discernible.

The most obvious changes to the workplace involved the size and composition of the various countries' workforces. Registering only 24 million in 1900 (and including labourers aged ten and up) and 139 million (aged 16 and older), the size of America's workforce, for instance, increased by almost six-fold – in line with its overall population growth. At the same time, the composition of the workforce shifted from industries dominated by primary production occupations, such as farmers and foresters, to those dominated by professional, technical and, in particular, service workers. At the beginning of the 20th century, 38% of all American workers were employed on farms, by the end of the same century, that figure had fallen to less than 3 %.

In Europe, much the same process occurred. In the 1930's, in every European country, except Britain and Belgium, more than 20 per cent of the population worked in agriculture. By the 1980's, however, the farming populations of all developed countries, excluding Eastern Europe, had dropped to ten per cent and was often even lower. At the same time, capital intensive farming using highly mechanized techniques dramatically reduced the numbers needed to farm there.

And therein lay the problem. While the workplace became a safer and more productive environment, a world away from the harsh working conditions of our forefathers, the switch from an agricultural to a modern working environment also created massive unemployment in many countries. Fundamental to this problem was the widespread move from the countryside to the city. Having lost their livelihoods, the world's peasant populations amassed in ever larger numbers in already crowded communities, where rates of job growth failed to keep up with internal migration. As a result, thousands were left squatting in shanty towns on the periphery of cities, waiting for jobs that might never arrive. While this was (and is) particularly true of Third World countries, the same phenomenon could also be witnessed in several American, French, English and German cities in the late 20th century.

From a different and more positive perspective, in the 20th century, women became visible and active members of all sectors of the Western workplace. In 1900, only 19% of European women of working age participated in the labour force; by 1999, this figure had risen to 60%. In 1900, only 1% of the country's lawyers and 6% of its physicians were female; by contrast, the figures were 29% and 24% in 1999. A recent survey of French teenagers, both male and female, revealed that over 50% of those polled thought that, in any job (bar those involving military service), women make better employees, as they are less likely to become riled under stress and less overtly competitive than men.

The last and perhaps most significant change to the 20th-century workplace involved the introduction of technology. The list of technological improvements in the workplace is endless: communication and measuring devices, computers of all shapes and sizes, x-ray, lasers, neon lights, stainless steel, and so on and on. Such improvements led to a more productive, safer working environment. Moreover, the fact that medicine improved so dramatically led to an increase in the average lifespan among Western populations. In turn, workers of very different ages were able to work shoulder to shoulder, and continue in their jobs far longer.

By the end of 20th century, the Western workplace had undergone remarkable changes. In general, both men and women worked fewer hours per day for more years under better conditions. Yet, the power of agriculture had waned as farmers and foresters moved to cities to earn greater salaries as analysts and accountants. For those who could not make this transition, however, life at the dawn of the new century seemed less appealing.

Questions 1-4

Choose **NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS** from the reading paragraph for each answer.

1. Several changes took place in the working environment in the 20th century:
_____ stopped almost completely in most countries, salaries increased while the number of working hours in a week decreased.
2. Because of the improvement in both the methodology and the carrying out of data collection _____ at the end of the century were in a better position to understand how and why their lives had been made easier.
3. In 1999 _____ of European women of working age participated in the workforce.
4. A particularly significant change to the 20th-century workplace came via _____ which brought about a long list of innovations and improvements.

Questions 5-9

Do the following statements agree with the information given in the passage?

In the space provided write:

TRUE if the statement agrees with the writer

FALSE if the statement contradicts the writer

NOT GIVEN if there is no specific information about this in the passage

5. No significant drawbacks accompanied changes in the work environment during the 20th century. _____
6. America and Europe shared the same overall trends in terms of the development of the workplace throughout the twentieth century. _____
7. The appearance of shanty towns after farmers move into city areas occurred primarily in the Third World. _____
8. In 1900, 19% of North American women of working age participated in the workforce. _____
9. Improvements in medicine led to workers earning more over a longer period. _____

Questions 10-14

Below is a summary of the passage. Using information from the passage, complete the summary. Choose **NO MORE THAN FOUR WORDS** from the passage to complete each space

The Western workplace changed dramatically in the course of the 20th century. Most of these changes should be viewed as positive; and, thanks to important developments in **10** _____ more people than ever were able to appreciate the improvements made. The most obvious changes concerned the **11** _____ of the workforce. Another major trend was the gradual urbanization of countries, as farmers and other primary producers left their homes and went to the cities in search of work. Sadly, **12** _____ grew up as many waited on the outskirts of cities throughout both developing and developed countries, waiting for work. Another significant difference between the beginning and close of the 20th century was the number of **13** _____ that chose to take jobs. Impressively, moreover, many of the professions they chose had previously been considered the preserve of men alone. The last great change was the introduction of technology. Technological improvements in the field of **14** _____ led to an increase in the average lifespan and, not surprisingly, also resulted in an older working population.

Answers:

1. child labour: (paragraph A)
2. workers: (paragraph B)
3. 60%: (paragraph F)
4. technology: (paragraph G)
5. No
6. NOT GIVEN
7. YES
8. NO
9. NOT GIVEN
10. methodology and data gathering
11. size and composition
12. shanty towns
13. women/ females
14. medicine