

# Impacts of a Changing Global Economy on work Organizations: A Neo and Post-Fordist Look at General Motors and Google Inc.

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## ABSTRACT

*Work is a very important part of our everyday lives. Furthermore, the landscape of work in the U.S. has changed dramatically over the past 15-20 years in response to economic shifts and an increasingly global economy. This article briefly reviews the origins of two contrasting management paradigms of work, Neo-Fordism and Post-Fordism. Additionally, this article looks at recent changes in job characteristics implications for worker job satisfaction by applying the Neo and Post-Fordist frameworks to two short case studies: General Motors and Google Corporation. From preliminary evidence in the brief case studies, it is concluded that both the Neo and Post-Fordist frameworks are useful in understanding differing extrinsic and intrinsic job characteristics that drive worker satisfaction.*

## INTRODUCTION

One of the many challenges facing employers today revolves around staffing the organization. Whether considering a business in the private sector, a government agency, or even a non-profit or NGO, finding the right people for the right job is a challenge. Additionally, once an organization is able to recruit and hire someone with the right qualifications and fit, the challenge then revolves around how to keep the individual. It is estimated that the costs associated with training one new worker to become proficient in his or her job equals approximately half that worker's annual salary, so high turnover rates are very costly for organizations. Furthermore, in a day and age where the average worker is projected to change careers more than five times over the course of his or her working life, in an increasingly competitive marketplace where employers are fighting over an ever-decrease workforce, and in an economic environment of mass lay-offs, downsizing, organizational mergers, and outsourcing—where employees seemingly have little reason to feel a sense of security in their job, this becomes an ever-increasing challenge for firms as they fight to stay competitive in a global market. In order to retain any employees, let alone top performing employees, organizations seem to be going to extra-ordinary lengths to “empower” and fully “engage” their employees to help increase overall work quality and job satisfaction. There is a large body of workplace literature across disciplines (sociology of work, organizational behavior, economic sociology, organizational psychology, etc.) that indicate a variety of job satisfaction indicators (i.e. job security, pay, worker autonomy, interesting work, etc.).

One subset of this literature deals with Fordism (including Neo-Fordist and Post-Fordist theories) and the predictions for shifts in overall job quality and job satisfaction over time. This body of literature generally acknowledges that work in the U.S. has changed dramatically in the post-war era, even more so over the past 15-20 years in response to economic shifts and an increasingly global economy. However, there is little agreement on whether the overall quality of work has improved or declined over that time period. Neo-Fordist theory argues that job quality has declined as businesses have responded to economic recessions by removing many of the labor gains of the post-war era. On the other hand, Post-Fordist theory argues that job quality has improved due to the adoption of participative management practices and strategies, the diffusion of information technology, and changing markets.

These two theories provide very different predictions for shifts in overall job quality and job satisfaction over the past 20 years. In what follows, I will provide a brief background of Fordism, followed by a description of both Neo-Fordist and Post-Fordist theories and predictions. Finally, I will then apply these theories and predictions to two very different types of firms (General Motors Corporation and Google Corporation) that will serve as brief case studies depicting these theoretical predictions in the real world.

## BACKGROUND TO THE FORDIST PERSPECTIVE

My main purpose in this study is to understand changing labor-management conditions and relations—resulting from global economic shifts—and the impact on job quality. To do this, I will start by providing a brief overview of the Fordist position, followed by its predecessors, Neo and Post-Fordism.

### *Fordism and a Changing Global Economic Climate*

Fordism is a system of mechanized mass production of consumer durable goods (also requiring mass consumption), characterized by a labor process based around the fragmentation of tasks and the assembly-line, operated by semi-skilled mass labor, and is derived from Henry Ford's approach to the mass production for mass consumption of automobiles early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hodkinson 1997). More specific characteristics of the Fordist approach to production and management include (see Hodkinson 1997):

- Assembly and production in large-scale factories, with sequential synchronization of tasks
- Worker organization based on a large, mostly unskilled labor force
- Standardized production in large volume
- Products designed for easy assembly
- The use of specialized machinery in production process
- Tight management control of the labor process

Due to Ford's early success with assembly line mass production and the promise of massive increases in productivity, other firms soon imitated his approach, with the Fordist influence being felt across the U.S. economy and other industrialized capitalist nations, particularly as part of the capitalist boom following World War II (Hodkinson 1997; Amin 1994; Piore and Sabel 1984). However, by the early 1970's, as many Western economies experienced slow economic growth, rising inflation, and growing unemployment in the following decades, the Fordist approach began to fade in popularity and give way to its predecessors, Neo-Fordism and Post-Fordism (Baca 2004; Hardt and Negri 2000).

## POST FORDISM (MASS PRODUCTION)

Scholars acknowledged that one possible response to the economic shift of the 1970's was a move away from the principles of Fordism in an attempt to meet the demands to innovate and meet new consumer needs (Hardt and Negri 2000). This new approach is often called Post-Fordism, or "Organized Capitalism," and is typified by the word "flexibility," where labor and resources are used in a strategic fashion to enable production systems to be responsive to market changes and cycles and to encourage workers to develop new skills in order to be able to operate across a range of tasks (Amin 1994; Hirst and Zeitlin 1991; Priore and Sabel 1984).

Additionally, the Post-Fordist management paradigm is an approach acknowledged to benefits both firms and workers (Brown and Lauder 1992). According to Post-Fordist scholars, the 1970's economic shift demonstrates that high levels of management control and adversarial employment relations, as well as the industrialized division of labor inherited from the industrial era, are obsolete (Amin 1994; Hirst and Zeitlin 1991). Rather, changing markets and information technology exert pressures for firms to break with Fordism and to institute policies of job enrichment, decentralized decision-making, employee teamwork, and management-labor cooperation (Handel 2005; Hirst and Zeitlin 1991). Furthermore, this perspective sees a de-industrialization in the economy—a shift from the compartmentalization of labor characterized in classical Fordism to greater employee involvement and the use of self-managed work teams and other such practices, due in large part to market shifts favoring higher quality and more customized goods and the spread of information technology (Souza-Poza and Souza-Poza 2000; Amin 1994; Hirst and Zeitlin 1991; Priore and Sabel 1984). This has increased job skill requirements, task variety, and job autonomy, resulting in greater job enrichment and workplace cooperation (Hirst and Zeitlin 1991; Hersey and Blanchard 1982; Vroom 1964).

The following is a summary of the key aspects of the Neo-Fordist position (Handel, 2005):

1. Mean earnings have stagnated or fallen for most categories of workers since the early 1970's (in stark contrast to the previous 25 years).
2. The recession of the 1980's (larger than any since the Great Depression) greatly impacted the U.S. economy and helped to accelerate union decline across U.S. industry.
3. Earnings inequality increased in the 1980's and 1990's.
4. Job security and internal labor markets eroded in the 1990's, especially for white-collar and more educated workers.
5. Employee workloads and overall stress increased in the 1980's and 1990's.

For Post-Fordists, the preceding points are evidence that the overall quality of jobs for most workers has increased in the last 20 years, particularly in terms of intrinsic rewards, and this trend is expected to continue. Many studies support some claims of post-Fordism. Scholars have shown that indicators of improved job quality have all increased in recent years, in terms of both extrinsic rewards such as pay, job security, and opportunities for advancement, but more particularly in terms of intrinsic rewards such as job challenge, autonomy, worker relations, and working conditions (Autor, Kratz, and Krueger 1998; Phelps 2002). Furthermore, scholars have demonstrated that employees want to be more involved in workplace decisions, and that when such opportunity is provided, employees report higher job satisfaction (Appelbaum et al. 2000; Cappelli and Neumark 2001; Cotton 1993; Freeman and Rogers 1999; Godard 2001; Hodson 1996, 2001). One possible cause for these upward trends in aspects of work quality is the recent market shifts favoring higher quality and more customized goods and the spread of information technology, which has increased job skill requirements, task variety, and job autonomy, resulting in greater job enrichment and workplace cooperation (Handel 2005).

Thus, Post-Fordists would predict that the overall quality of jobs for most workers has increased in the last 20 years, particularly in terms of intrinsic non-material rewards, due to the adoption of participative management practices and strategies, the diffusion of information technology, and changing markets (Osterman 1994; Piore & Sabel 1984; Zuboff 1988).

### **NEO-FORDISM (FLEXIBLE PRODUCTION)**

Scholars acknowledge that another response to the economic crisis of the 1970's was an attempt to meet the demand for varied products while maintaining the basic Fordist principles of production (Avis et al. 1996). This perspective is often called Neo-Fordism, or "Flexible Production," and maintains the basic principles of the traditional firm held by Fordism, while accentuating other principles, such as flexible production, in an attempt to correct for insufficiencies in the original Fordist theory and application (Graham 1993; Harrison 1994; Harrison and Bluestone 1988; Harvey 1989; Mishel, Bernstein, and Schmitt 2001; Schor 1991; Taplin 1995; for relevant reviews, see Kalleberg 2000; Morris and Western 1999). Thus, this new approach combines the logic of mass production and mass consumption with more flexible production, distribution, and marketing systems.

This perspective sees a de-industrialization in the economy—a shift from the compartmentalization of labor characterized in classical Fordism to greater employee involvement and the use of self-managed work teams and other such practices, due in large part to market shifts favoring higher quality and more customized goods and the spread of information technology. This has increased job skill requirements, task variety, and job autonomy, resulting in greater job enrichment and workplace cooperation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these ideas build on earlier theories of post industrialism and post materialism, which predicted that jobs would become more skilled and enriched as a result of the rising education levels of workers, the increasing proportion of professional and managerial jobs, and the perceived value shift among workers toward more meaningful or intrinsically rewarding work rather than the traditional focus on higher pay.

The following is a summary of the key aspects of Post-Fordist theory (Handel, 2005):

1. The traditional postindustrial indicators of improved job quality (i.e. the education levels of workers, the proportion of professionals and managers in the workforce, and the use of computer technology at work) have all increased in recent years.
2. Employees want to be more involved in workplace decisions. Furthermore, those who participate in employee involvement programs generally endorse them and report greater job satisfaction, autonomy, and intrinsic rewards.
3. Many workers doubt that management is committed to serious change and believe that many programs are token and ineffectual and have offsetting negative implications, such as increased stress, for workers.

Two main features can generally characterize various Neo-Fordist approaches (Harrison 1994; Berger and Piore 1980; Edwards 1979):

1. **Flexible Production Methods:** combining economies of scale with economies of scope (i.e. mass production with small-batch production, just-in-time inventory systems, subcontracting, etc.), where flexible production allows firms to control/reduce labor costs, which then increases the level of surplus extraction from workers, and where computer technology allows for robotic production systems in ways that permit firms to augment labor productivity.
2. **Growth/Transformation of Financial Markets:** an increase in geographical and temporal flexibility of capital accumulation (ease and rapidity with which capital and information can flow across countries).

In addition to the features stated above, there is increased flexibility within and between firms, with an overall sensitivity to demands and niche marketing and product differentiation (Dohse, Jürgens, & Malsch 1985; Graham 1993; Taplin 1995). The Neo-Fordist approach can also be characterized by a rapid adoption of new technologies/improving technologies, such as transport and communication technologies that help to reduce time and cost associated with moving raw materials, finished products, and financial capital. Furthermore, it can be characterized by a two-tiered employment hierarchy of privileged and unprivileged workers.

For Neo-Fordists, the preceding points are evidence that the overall quality of jobs for most workers has declined in the last 20 years, particularly in terms of extrinsic material rewards and work pace, and this trend is expected to continue (as a result of employer efforts to reduce labor costs). Many studies support some claims of Neo-Fordism. Scholars have shown that mean earnings stagnated or fell for most categories of workers over that period and that earnings inequality grew (Handel 2005). Furthermore, scholars have shown that the increased frequency of downsizing, mass layoffs, overseas outsourcing, and the use of contingent employment has further diminished workers' overall job security while workloads have continued to increase without a commensurate rise in pay (Handel 2005; Harrison 1994). One possible cause for these downward trends in work quality is the lessening influence of unions. Benefits such as relatively high pay, job security, and career mobility that were extended to workers during years of economic growth following World War II have been reduced or removed and generally apply to a smaller proportion of workers as corporations seek lower costs.

Thus, Neo-Fordists would predict that the overall quality of jobs for most workers has declined in the last 20 years, particularly in terms of extrinsic material rewards and work pace, as businesses have responded to economic recessions by removing many of the labor gains of the post-war era (Handel 2005; Harrison 1994).

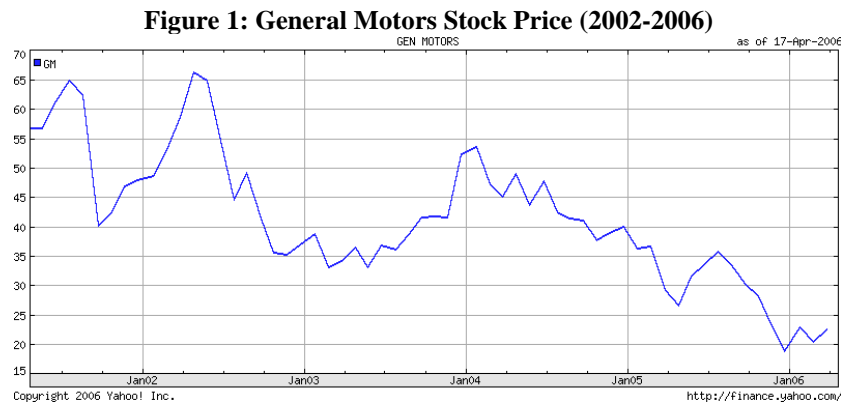
### **NEO-FORDIST THEORY APPLIED: A LOOK AT GENERAL MOTORS**

In what follows, I will first provide a brief overview of General Motors Corporation (GM), followed by an analysis of GM from the Neo-Fordist perspective. Though this is not intended to be a fully comprehensive look at GM, it does provide some preliminary insight into the corporation and provides the opportunity to make the theoretical application. Certainly additional future research would be in order, involving the collection of both relevant qualitative and quantitative data to facilitate a more rigorous analysis of the theoretical paradigms.

#### *Overview of General Motors Corporation*

As the world's largest automaker and global industry sales leader for 75 years, GM provides a good example of a traditional industrial corporation. Founded in 1908, GM today employs about 327,000 people around the world. With global headquarters in Detroit, GM manufactures its cars and trucks in 33 countries.

GM prides itself on what it calls its performance culture in the workplace. However, despite its high focus on performance, GM has been struggling to remain competitive with other car manufacturers in the industry, both U.S. manufacturers and global competitors. Figure 1 below shows the rapid decline of GM stock over the past 5 years, currently at \$20.19 a share.<sup>2</sup>



***Looking at General Motors from the Neo-Fordist Perspective***

Using the key aspects of the Neo-Fordist position (Handel, 2005) outlined earlier in this paper, I will now take a look at GM from a Neo-Fordist perspective and provide a prediction as to possible changing trends in job quality and job satisfaction for GM employees.

1. *Mean earnings have stagnated or fallen for most categories of workers since the early 1970's.*

As is the case with others in the industry, GM factory workers are earning less and less. However, salary stagnation does not stop there. Mid-range management also has seen similar stagnation in its pay and benefits.

2. *Union membership has been in steady decline across U.S. industry.*

GM reports that fewer and fewer of its employees are unionized, in part as a result of the current layoffs in effect through 2008. In reference to diminishing GM employee enrollment in unions, Miller reported, "About one in five members of the U.S. work force belonged to a union in 1983, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. That number has slipped to one in eight in 2005. In the 1950s, union membership was about 35 percent" (2006). This means that employees do not have the same protection from management as they have had in the past.

3. *Earnings inequality increased in the 1980's and 1990's.*

As mean earnings have stagnated for most low-to-midrange workers, CEO and upper executive salaries and bonus packages have continued to increase dramatically, greatly increasing the overall earnings inequality. However, this is not unique to GM. Across industries, CEO's are reported to earn at a rate of 300:1 over the lowest paid company employees.

4. *Job security and internal labor markets eroded in the 1990's, especially for white-collar and more educated workers.*

<sup>2</sup> As of 7:30 am on April 18, 2006. This stock data is included merely as it reflects on the state of GM and is a very general indicator of overall organizational competitiveness and success. A similar figure on stock data for Google, Inc. will also be provided in the subsequent section, and in no way do I mean to suggest that the difference in financial market performance is due only to Neo and Post-Fordist managerial cultures. Certainly many other factors are also at play overall financial market performance.

The following news excerpts provide a glimpse at the eroding job security at GM:

- “General Motors... Chairman G. Richard Wagoner Jr. announced that the company would slash 25,000 U.S. manufacturing jobs by 2008, as it looks to cut costs” (Murphy, 2005).
- “GM also plans to eliminate 30,000 of its 113,000 hourly factory positions....” (Peters, 2006).
- “GM announced the Doraville plant, which has about 3,100 employees, will cease production at the end of its current products' lifecycle in 2008” (Swint, 2006).
- “General Motors has laid off several hundred white-collar workers, its latest move in a restructuring plan that is cutting deeply into all ranks of the company” (Peters, 2006).
- “General Motors Company's parts suppliers, are being sent a very clear, if not explicit message: outsource to cheap labor nations, or lose the business altogether” (Auto Service World, 2006).

Through a combination of mass lay-offs and an unofficial outsourcing initiative, GM, like others in the car industry is seeking to cut costs in response to slowing sales and a shift in the global production market. This results in diminished job security for its workers, and not just factory workers, but also white-collar workers and management. Indeed, in such a volatile industry, no one is safe from being laid off, even from a global leader like GM.

#### 5. *Employee workloads and overall stress increased in the 1980's and 1990's.*

General Motors has continued to increase employee workloads in response to its efforts to cut costs and remain competitive, in part by “... by laying people off and by leaving open positions unfilled” (Peters, 2006).

As Neo-Fordists would predict that the overall quality of jobs for most workers has declined in the last 20 years, particularly in terms of extrinsic material rewards and work pace, General Motors provides a helpful example of a highly industrialized firm built upon first a Fordist approach, followed by one characterized by the Neo-Fordists. Due to shifts and an overall increased competitiveness in the global production market, GM finds itself in a similar position to many other industrialized production firms; that is, cutting costs by reducing salary and benefits, reducing the workforce through mass lay-offs and outsourcing overseas, and as a result increasing the overall workload for those workers remaining with the firm. Though GM prides itself on an annual quit rate due to employee dissatisfaction that is less than 1% (which is substantially lower than the industry average) it has an interesting overall philosophy towards job satisfaction that epitomizes the Neo-Fordist perspective: “The key to helping assure job satisfaction is a disciplined process, constant focus and a strong drive for results...” (General Motors, 2006). Neo-Fordists would not find it surprising that GM focuses on management control and the production of results, and would site this philosophy as simply additional evidence of decreasing worker job satisfaction and overall job quality at General Motors Corporation over the past few decades.

### **POST-FORDIST THEORY APPLIED: A LOOK AT GOOGLE INCORPORATED**

In what follows, I will first provide a brief overview of Google Inc, followed by an analysis of Google from the Post-Fordist perspective. As was the case with GM, though this is not intended to be a fully comprehensive look at Google, Inc., it does provide some preliminary insight into the corporation and provides the opportunity to make the theoretical application. Certainly additional future research would be in order, involving the collection of both relevant qualitative and quantitative data to facilitate a more rigorous analysis of the theoretical paradigms.

#### *Overview of Google*

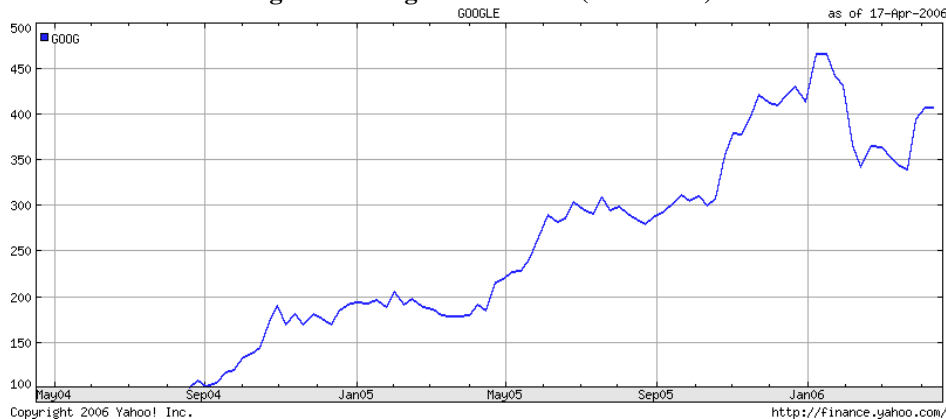
As arguably the world's brightest tech-firm and the envy of others in the industry, Google provides web browsers with the world's most powerful search engine, in addition to many other consumer-oriented products technical products. Thus, Google Inc. provides a good example of a de-industrialized technology corporation that thrives on continued innovation. Founded in 1908, Google today employs 5,680 full time employees<sup>3</sup>—many of whom are technical/engineering employees, and his headquartered in Mountain View, California.

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<sup>3</sup> As of December 31, 2005

Google prides itself on what it calls its innovation culture in the workplace. This approach has proved effective, as Google has been able to maintain its dominance in the technology industry and continue to experience phenomenal growth. Figure 2 below shows the rapid increase of Google stock over the past 2 years, currently at \$406.82 a share.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 2: Google Stock Price (2004-2006)**



### *Looking at Google from the Post-Fordist Perspective*

Using the key aspects of the Post-Fordist position (Handel, 2005) outlined earlier in this paper, I will now look at Google from a Post-Fordist perspective and provide a prediction as to possible changing trends in job quality and job satisfaction for Google employees.

#### *1. Postindustrial indicators of improved job quality have all increased in recent years.*

As is the case with many other young start-up tech firms, Google promotes worker creativity and innovation, job autonomy, cooperation and the sharing of knowledge through open communication and positive employer-employee and coworker relations, and an overall laid back work atmosphere. The following excerpt from the Google Corporate website sums this up nicely:

“Google's culture is unlike any in corporate America, and it's not because of the ubiquitous lava lamps and large rubber balls, or the fact that the company's chef used to cook for the Grateful Dead. In the same way Google puts users first when it comes to our online service, Google Inc. puts employees first when it comes to daily life in our Googleplex headquarters. There is an emphasis on team achievements and pride in individual accomplishments that contribute to the company's overall success. Ideas are traded, tested and put into practice with an alacrity that can be dizzying. Meetings that would take hours elsewhere are frequently little more than a conversation in line for lunch and few walls separate those who write the code from those who write the checks. This highly communicative environment fosters a productivity and camaraderie fueled by the realization that millions of people rely on Google results. Give the proper tools to a group of people who like to make a difference, and they will” (Google Inc., 2006).

#### *2. Employees want to be more involved in workplace decisions.*

Google understands the need for employee involvement and sees it as an indispensable part of remaining competitive. In addition to the quotation above, the following two excerpts further illustrate Google's commitment to employee involvement and joint decision-making:

- “The informal atmosphere bred both collegiality and an accelerated exchange of ideas” (Google Inc., 2006).
- “Google has persistently pursued innovation and pushed the limits of existing technology to provide a fast, accurate and easy-to-use search service that can be accessed from anywhere” (Google Inc., 2006).

These quotations further illustrate Google's desire to have channels of open communication among its workers and employees involved in the process of innovation at all levels.

<sup>4</sup> As of 7:30 am on April 18, 2006.

As Post-Fordists would predict that the overall quality of jobs for most workers has increased in the last 20 years, particularly in terms of intrinsic non-material rewards, Google provides a helpful example of a highly young and energized de-industrialized technology firm built firmly upon the Post-Fordist approach to management and employee relations. Due to shifts and an overall increased competitiveness in the global production market, Google finds itself in a similar position to many other de-industrialized technology firms; that is, enjoying growth and expansion because of greater employee involvement and innovation, with a more relaxed corporate culture and a management philosophy of relinquishing control to its employees. Google prides itself on its overall focus on the everyday computer user (the consumer) and its philosophy of “never settling for the best”—a philosophy that promotes continued innovation in the workplace. Post-Fordists would not find it surprising that Google focuses on job enrichment, decentralized decision-making, employee teamwork, and management-labor cooperation. Furthermore, Post-Fordists would site Google’s overall management philosophy as simply additional evidence of increasing worker job satisfaction and overall job quality at Google since its inception only a few years ago and more generally to increased job quality in tech firms across the board.

## CONCLUSION

General quality of jobs has either declined or improved over time, based on various job dimensions. While acknowledging that work in the U.S. has changed dramatically in the post-war era in response to economic shifts and an increasingly global economy, particularly over the past 15-20 years, the literature on Neo-Fordism and Post-Fordism provides very different predictions for shifts in overall job quality and job satisfaction over time. Neo-Fordist theory argues that job quality has declined as businesses have responded to economic recessions by removing many of the extrinsic rewards gained by the labor movement in the post-war era. In contrast, Post-Fordist theory argues that job quality has improved in conjunction with the de-industrialization of the U.S. economy, due to such factors as the adoption of participative management practices and strategies, the diffusion of information technology, and changing product markets. Which one is right? A brief look at the application of these theories in the real world (General Motors Corporation and Google Corporation) reveals that in fact, they may both be correct, in terms of extrinsic and intrinsic reward changes in the workplace. As Neo-Fordists see a decline in material rewards associated with work, as characterized by General Motors (i.e. pay, job security, opportunity for advancement), Post-Fordists see an increase in the intrinsic rewards, as characterized by Google (i.e. interesting work, job autonomy, employee relations). Both components (extrinsic and intrinsic) are important to overall job quality and job satisfaction. Therefore, it is likely that in the event both occur within the same company, these changes would simply offset each other in terms of overall increases in job quality and worker job satisfaction.

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