

## Information Technology and Workplace Democracy

Martin Beirne and Harvie Ramsay (Editors)  
Rutledge, London, 1992, \$85.00

REVIEWED BY

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This book is a compilation of nine essays on several topics describing the effects of information technology (IT) in the workplace. The authors are faculty and researchers in British universities. The book is edited by Martin Beirne, a lecturer at Glasgow University, and Harvie Ramsay, who lectures at the University of Strathclyde.

The book is organized into nine chapters, all of which are dedicated to the effects of IT on workplace democracy (WD) and the job security in British institutions. Ten different authors have contributed to the nine essays.

The essays are aimed at the degree to which IT influences both the individual worker and groups of workers, including trade unions. The emphasis is on industrial relations and the role that IT plays in the modern organization. As all the writers are British, we find in the book descriptions of Britain's experiences with IT, with two of the nine chapters devoted to trade unions. This is a vastly different approach from that of American authors. Yet, this book is a refreshing perspective on employees' participation in technical change and IT decisions, coupled with the effects of IT — once implemented — on further eroding employees' control over their jobs and destiny. Patricia Findlay, who authored the chapter on the electronics industry in the UK, best summarized the book's findings. She wrote: "The evidence indicates that the issue of technical change, despite its importance for management and employees, was not one in which employees were given significant input, for a variety of reasons outlined earlier." In fact, what characterized the survey firms according to their managers was an obvious lack of consultation and involvement, with the possible exception of involvement at the stage of implementation. In this respect, therefore, the electronics industry does not appear to be dissimilar to other sectors in manufacturing (page 89).

I might add that the British experiences are not dissimilar to those in U.S. industry, as amply described, for example, by Zuboff (1985) and Geisler and Rubenstein (1987). However, Beirne and Ramsay offer a unique British outlook as they seem to depart from the tradition of such British

writers as Woodward, Child and Pugh. They particularly depart from the optimism expressed by Woodward (1965) and the scholars who followed in her footsteps. In the discussion on whether IT "enskills" or "deskills" employees, Beirne and Ramsay choose the middle of the road. They also avoid the pessimistic determinism which contends that IT necessarily would de-empower employees.

The appeal of this book lies, among other factors, on the focus on employees rather than on the managerial implications of IT's effects on the organization. The latter seems to be the favorite of American writers, and it's refreshing to contemplate a different perspective.

I find myself pleased at my own positive reaction to the book's overemphasis on the role of the trade unions and their importance in British industrial environment (I, 1993). The book offers at least five different perspectives on the effects of IT, so the net effect is that the discussions on trade unions blend in with the overall topic. Moreover, throughout the book there is a feeling that the essays follow the tradition of the Tavistock school of socio-technical analysis of innovation and its effects on human organizations.

In a particularly exciting chapter, Lynn Valentine, who works for the BBC's parliamentary unit, studied the effect of IT on gender inequalities. She surveyed in 1989 over 130 librarians. She has concluded: "... technology has not reduced but has tended to reinforce those inequalities which exist in the profession" (page 210).

I am impressed with the fact that although the authors could have easily taken a politically viable laborite position in advocacy of social determinism and government/unions intervention, they nevertheless have maintained a strong academic objectivity. The reader is offered a good description of the findings from surveys, and a challenging analysis. The reader is thus left to his/her own devices in choosing a position on what are the effects of IT on industrial relations.

I recommend this book not only to those interested in socio-technical issues, but to scholars and practitioners in the management of IT. Although the British experience may

have some unique characteristics, it is nevertheless similar to our own. The authors suggest that: "... Britain is a laggard in skill formation, regardless of employer publicity, namely that of training" (page 45). So, notwithstanding some biases of the U.K. industrial environment, this book is an excellent compilation of revealing essays. The various authors discuss a very important topic of the impacts of IT on workplace control, democracy and skill building. Such a topic has not received adequate attention in the American research literature. I hope that this book will encourage the reignition of such a crucial research topic, as well as serve as a book of reading for courses on IT management at the graduate level.

#### REFERENCES

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