

Solution Quiz 1

The Hawthorne Experiment

A major episode in the quest to understand behavioral aspects was the series of studies conducted at the Western Electric Hawthorne plant in Chicago between 1924 and 1932. These studies originally began with a simple question: How does workplace illumination affect worker productivity? Under sponsorship from the National Academy of Science, a team of researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) observed groups of coil-winding operators under different lighting levels. They observed that productivity relative to a control group went up as illumination increased, as had been expected. Then, in another experiment, they observed that productivity also increased when illumination *decreased*, even to the level of moonlight. Unable to explain the results, the original team abandoned the illumination studies and began other tests on the effect of rest periods, length of work week, incentive plans, free lunches, and supervisory styles on productivity. In most cases the trend was for higher than normal output by the groups under study.

Approaching the problem from the perspective of the “psychology of the total situation,” experts brought in to study the problem came to the conclusion that the results were primarily due to “a remarkable change in the mental attitude in the group.” Interpretations of the study were eventually reduced to the simple explanation that productivity increased as a result of the attention received by the workers under study. This was dubbed the *Hawthorne effect*. However, in subsequent writings this simple explanation was modified to include the argument that work is a group activity and that workers strive for a sense of belonging—not simple financial gain—in their jobs. By emphasizing the need for listening and counseling by managers to improve worker collaboration, the industrial psychology movement shifted the emphasis of management from technical efficiency—the focus of Taylorism—to a richer, more complex, human-relations orientation.