The Dark History Of Our Obsession With Productivity

The starting of early productivity in America

America started its economy in the 17th and 18th centuries, mainly using labours or slaves (person held to service or labor), who helped build the new nation into an economic powerhouse through the production of lucrative crops such as tobacco and cotton. The historical mentions of productivity in that classic economics text 'Wealth of Nations" by Adam Smith in 1776 mentioned that there were two kinds of labor: productive and unproductive. "Productive" is when a labor able to produce a value; and when labors increased or multiplied to operate a bigger operation as manufacturing, more value is created thus they deserve a significant reward. Interestingly enough, the first 'to-do' list was created as productivity tool in 1791 by Benjamin Franklin, a contemporary of the Scottish economist. The list was simple enough to evaluate tasks that have been accomplished for the day (eg wash, work, read) by prioritising them based on its importance and urgency. Benjamin Franklin is a great example of someone known for using lists to encourage his own self-improvement. He famously detailed a thirteen-week plan to practice important virtues such as cleanliness, temperance, etc. Each day he tracked his progress on a chart and set himself a strict daily routine, all set for specific times of the day

During the early days of the Industrial Revolution in the U.S, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin,it marked a significant milestone in productivity as the machine able to speed up production 25-fold. Since then, U.S saw other inventions created that shift traditional used of labor or slaves massively in the farm or other economic activities - steamboats, sewing machines, light bulbs, telephones were amongst few created as tools to push for productivity. Although the 20th century was rocked by two World

Wars, productivity was remained as focal point for manufacturing of goods. Between 1870 and 1900, average productivity increased 2 percent a year. That was because of increased life expectancy that allowed workers to live longer. Technology, such as railroads, telegraphs, and the internal combustion engine, also helped workers produce more. The notion of planning's role in increasing productivity is critical in this era that the daily planner was a means to self-improvement. This has led to later a calculation of wages based on how fast a job is done, and determined the most efficient and effective way to carry it out.

Productivity by leadership

Productivity has since become one of the main important factors used as the yardstick for measuring quality levels. The ideology is further driven by the leadership of productive management practices. Leadership undeniably affects organizational performance, specifically employee outcomes and productivity. Job satisfaction, productivity and organizational commitment are affected by leadership behaviors. Leaders, apart from their actions and personal influence, should be empowered to make the critical decisions and keep operations running smoothly and effectively. Among some of the most recognizable leaders are Michael Porter and Tom Peters, whose book in "Search of Excellence' chronicles the productivity practices of "America's best-run companies". The roots of Six Sigma as a measurement standard can be traced back to Carl Friedrich Gauss (1777-1855) who introduced the concept of the normal curve. Six Sigma as a measurement standard in product variation can be traced back to the 1920's when Walter Shewhart showed that three sigma from the mean is the point where a process requires correction. Many measurement standards (Cpk, Zero Defects, etc.) later came on the scene but credit for coining the term "Six Sigma" goes to a Motorola engineer named Bill Smith. (Incidentally, "Six Sigma" is a federally registered trademark of

Motorola). In 1986, Bill introduced Six Sigma as "a disciplined, data driven approach and methodology for eliminating defects (driving toward six standard deviations between the mean and the nearest specification limit) in any process- from manufacturing to transactional, and from product to service"

According to Six Sigma, "Productivity is much more important than revenues and profits of the organization because profits only reflect the end result, whereas productivity reflects the increased efficiency as well as effectiveness of business policies and processes. Moreover, it enables a business to find out its strengths and weaknesses. It also lets the business easily identify threats as well as its opportunities that prevail in the market as a result of competition and changes in business environment".

Advancement to drive more productivity

Technological advances, greater investment in machinery and equipment by businesses, increase workers' skill and experience, and other improvements to production can all lead to labor productivity growth. Innovations abounded in electricity generation, internal combustion engines, and telecommunications directly impact the speed of change, achieving aims and developing long-term improvement capability. There were new petrochemicals, including fertilizers for agriculture, plastics, and pharmaceuticals as result of technological advancement. Productivity improve organizational capability, promote reliable processes, increase profitability and competitiveness. However, Economist Robert Gordon of Northwestern University chalks this up to the fact that we are using methods and procedures that are over a decade old". Until we start incorporating more robots and AI to take over our tasks, this downward trend will continue". Nonetheless, if productivity fails to grow significantly—as has been the case in recent years—those participating in an economy are left with a level of goods and services that fails to grow substantially, making it more difficult to attain widespread gains in income. It is thus important to track labor

productivity, because it is the benchmark for potential gains in income of U.S. workers and shareholders.

It is a false belief that we need to be working all the time to be our most productive selves. As Leila Hock points out: "it's not hard work-work is work, and yes, some work requires more brain power, but most of us smart people like that and want more of it, so let's stop calling it hard. Let's call it productive. Effective. Valuable. Anything that speaks to nature over quantity, because that's what we need more of".