Mary B. Gilson — A Historical Study of the Neglected Accomplishments of a Woman Who Pioneered in Personnel Management

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Woman pioneers in personnel management have been all but ignored by management historians. This paper summarizes the work of Mary Gilson who was instrumental in the early development of the field of personnel. It is an extension of a paper which included other women who were pioneers in personnel management such as Jean Hoskins, Florence Hughes, Emily Osborne, and Jane C. Williams.

MARY B. GILSON -- ESTABLISHING EMPLOYMENT MANAGEMENT AT CLOTHCRAFT

From 1913 to 1924, Mary B. Gilson was the employment and service manager at the Clothcraft Shops of the Joseph & Feiss Company of Cleveland, Ohio (see [16]). The manager of this company was Richard A. Feiss, an early experimenter in the fields of production and personnel management. Feiss, in 1913, decided to change drastically the existing methods of manufacturing men's clothing by adopting the concepts of scientific management and new methods of employment management [12].

To accomplish the latter, he sought the help of Meyer Bloomfield, director of the Vocational Bureau of Boston, to search for a person to develop new methods of employment management. Bloomfield suggested Gilson. When she learned of Feiss' plans to integrate improved production methods with the selection, training, and development of workers, Gilson realized the company could become a beacon for future developments in employment management. She also discovered that Feiss wanted to create an organization whose aim was not merely the manufacture of clothing, but also the development of all employees through what he called "Personal Relationships." Under this concept,

Feiss believed that "the mechanical and material side of the organization will be better developed as a necessary incident to personal development than it would where this point of view is reversed" [3].

To reach these lofty goals, Feiss (aided by Gilson) created the concept of "organization fitness." Feiss and Gilson stressed that in most organizations only the worker's fitness for work was considered important. However, they believed there were two kinds of fitness to consider: fitness for position and fitness for organization. The latter concept is most important, they believed, because:

> no matter how skilled or fitted one may be to do a given piece of work, if he is out of harmony with the spirit or character of the organization, he will be an everlasting detriment to himself and all others in the organization who come into contact with him. [2]

Feiss gave Gilson complete freedom to develop methods to determine the generally accepted idea of "fitness for position" and the visionary ideas of "fitness for organization."

Altogether, Gilson created seven methods to reach the two goals just discussed: application forms, physical examinations, mental examinations, an interviewing program, an orientation program, a training program, home visits, employee counseling, and employee participation in decision-making.

Physical examinations were conducted to keep all positions filled with fit men and women. Special stress was placed on eye examinations because of the great reliance upon vision in many operations involved in garment making. Mental examinations were made through psychological tests. In fact, because of Gilson's efforts, Clothcraft was the first company to utilize such tests to test the manual skills and dexterity of applicants. The tests were also used by Gilson, later, to determine abilities of women and their fitness for more important positions. Gilson believed this was because "since it is a man's world men must give women a chance" [12, p. 99]. Gilson created a special interviewing program during which the interviewer not only discussed the responsibility of the worker to the organization (covering his responsibility for maintaining proper physical and moral conditions, regularity of attendance, and importance of character), but also the responsibility of the organization to the worker (covering earning opportunity, regularity of employment, and policies concerning methods of cooperation).

An orientation program followed the interview to introduce the employee to all the features of Clothcraft. This included introduction to the plant's dining rooms, locker rooms,

recreation halls, swimming pool, bowling alleys, barber shops, and athletic fields. At the end of the day, before the new employee left the factory, he or she was interviewed again to discover the employee's reaction to the job and the plant. This was also an opportunity to remind the employee that, if there were any doubts about the job, the employment and service department was there to help. These friendly, informal interviews were repeated the second and third days, at the end of one week, ten days, two weeks, and so on until the first difficulties of adjustment were over.

The primary objective of all these interviews, according to Gilson, was to

> impress the worker with the fact that there were people in the organization who are definitely and vitally interested in him as a human being...(and)...to help him secure steady and good earnings and to further the development of him and his family [13, p. 144].

Gilson's training program was also unique. Its aim was not merely the instruction of workers in the elements of their job. The instructor was also responsible for studying the workers to see whether they should be placed in a different position and, more importantly, for helping workers become fully adjusted to the factory. In short, the instructor was responsible for "the all round development of the worker. In fact, the instructor's responsibility in helping the workers to take root in an organization and to 'get a right start' is unlimited" [6, p. 83].

As a way to investigate the cause of absences (which limited the steady employment of all workers), Gilson created home visits and employee counseling. If a worker was absent, a home visit was made: "Every absentee was visited at home, and as fruitful as anything are the intimate friendly chats concerning plain business dress, the advantage of Rosie's being allowed to entertain her friends in the little parlor at home... and a thousand and one home and business problems..." [9, p. 281].

Employee participation in the decision-making activities at Clothcraft was encouraged by Feiss and Gilson and accomplished through three groups established by Gilson: The Foremen's Meetings, Employee Advisory Council, and Heads of Tables Conferences [13, p. 141]. All of these groups were empowered to propose changes to management (which could be vetoed by management) and also empowered to vote on changes proposed by management (and veto those changes if they decided to do so) [3, p. 8].

Feiss and Gilson responded to the total needs of the employees. At Clothcraft, separate locker rooms were provided

for men and women with each worker having a personal locker, and bath and shower rooms were also maintained. There were separate dining rooms for men and women (as the sexes were separated in both eating and working). Separate recreation grounds were provided where baseball, captain ball (a modified form of basketball), and quoits were played. There were inside recreation halls for use during inclement weather. These were used for dancing on regular days with music furnished by the factory orchestra. The rooms were also used for parties -- a frequent occurrence which was used to build working spirit for Clothcraft. A nursery was available, thus allowing mothers with preschool children the chance to work. It was found that 31.3 percent of Cleveland's foreign inhabitants (during this period) did not speak English. Since this was detrimental both to Clothcraft and the individual, an applicant who did not speak English had to agree to learn English at special classes given at Clothcraft company expense. Mary Gilson wrote,

> Long ago...we discovered what our Nation has been only too slow in discovering, that men's lack of understanding of one another is a real menace and that there can be no understanding without the common currency of language [14, p. 151].

Mary Gilson and Richard Feiss believed in education for the workers. Gilson said, "There are two kinds of training due a worker; one kind related to the technique of his job and one to the development of his character as a worker and citizen" [10, p. 7]. In terms of the job, Professor John R. Commons tells us that at Clothcraft, "management is bent upon having every worker familiar with several operations, so that the absence of a worker does not prevent her operation from being performed" [1]. As to the needs of the citizens, Feiss and Gilson believed that was the duty of every employer "to use every honest means to attain" better citizens [9, p. 3].

The above may smack of paternalism, but Gilson would have disagreed; for she was against the paternalism as practiced by many organizations at the turn of the century. She wrote,

> paternalism implies condescension to one's 'inferiors' and that joint agreements, no matter how legalistic, are not likely to have spiritual value where condescension [sic] is in the air. But employers in general, if, we are to strengthen the bulwarks of democracy, must take the initiative in training workers to assume the responsibilities industrial citizenship requires [12, p. 295].

Such innovative procedures were practiced at Clothcraft

until 1925 when they were abandoned. Their abandonment was not due to any flaws in Gilson's ideas, but because of financial problems and disagreements among the owners of Clothcraft. As part of the austerity program to save the company, most of Gilson's program was discontinued and she resigned. Richard Feiss went to Boston in 1926 and opened a consulting business. He remained in Boston until 1940 when he moved to California, and he died in 1956. Gilson, years later, claimed Feiss "...belonged to that unfortunate species of human being -- the man who is ahead of his time" [12, p. 211].

Mary Gilson, after leaving Clothcraft, wanted to continue her education. Finding that Harvard would not allow a "woman to sit in at the labor seminar, an activity in graduate work in economics which seemed palpably essential when my special field of investigation was to be labor," that "no woman could work in the library after six....," and that Harvard would not admit women to the Graduate School of Business Administration, only to its Graduate program in Economics, she therefore chose Columbia University [4, p. 342 and 12, p. 215]. Her master's thesis was an extension of the paper which she had presented at a meeting of the Taylor Society on 25 January 1924, originally titled "Scientific Management and Personnel Work" [10]. Before she was able to start her planned doctorate, she took a consulting position with the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association. In Hawaii she found the common attitude toward plantation labor was one of extreme condescension and paternalism in even the best managed plantations, with many of the other plantations offering dreadful working conditions. After finishing her work in Hawaii, she studied group life insurance in industry. This latter study led Mary Gilson to the problem of involuntary unemployment, a topic she was to spend many years studying. She wrote a manuscript, Unemployment Benefits in the United States, which she had to leave unfinished before she went to Europe to study European industrial plants. Her book was published in 1931 listing on the title page that it was written "by Bryce M. Stewart and Associates" [12, pp. 244 and 276]. In 1931, after two years study in Europe, she published Unemployment Insurance in Great Britain, which she called a "dull progeny" [12, ch. 24]. Following her work on unemployment, she was asked by Frances Perkins to study the stabilization of employment in the industrial plants of New York state. At first she said yes, but the University of Chicago convinced her to join its staff, instead, to teach economics. It was here that she wrote her absorbing book What's Past Is Prologue, an autobiography and study of applied scientific management [12]. She also taught a semester at her alma mater, Wellesley, and also at Cornell

University, and the University of Hawaii [8]. She died at Chapel Hill, North Carolina in 1959.

Although Mary Gilson did not write very extensively and, hence, has been overlooked by many searching for insights from our pioneer personnel leaders, she did leave many items worth remembering. When asked to review Management and the Worker by Roethlisberger and Dickson, considered by many as the classic in human relations, she attacked the research for "discovering the obvious" and "because what they (the researchers) learned was 'novel and unexpected' seems to me an acknowledgment of inexperience in the field of industrial practice" [5, p. 101]. Her attitude towards equality of the sexes placed her well ahead of most of her contemporaries. She wrote,

> It is my conviction that in general women are more snobbish and class conscious than men and that these ignoble traits are a product of men's attitude toward women and women's passive acceptance of this attitude. This, in turn, is due to women's anomalous place in society. I believe that all women of working age and physical capacity, regardless of income, should be expected to earn their livings either in or out of the home.... But here, as elsewhere, things operate in a framework and women are as confused as might be expected in a society which has never yet quite made up its mind in academic, professional, business and industrial circles, that women are really 'people' and that their full development cannot take place in a world full of restrictions and hurdles and obstacles not placed in the paths of men. Until the sky is the limit, as it is for men, men as well as women will suffer, because all society is affected when half of it is denied equal opportunity for full development. [12, pp. 289 and 291].

Fairness was what she was constantly seeking. In 1921, in an article written for a "male readership" magazine, Industrial Management, her article "Wages of Women in Industry," attacks many of the same arguments used today by those against the equal-pay law. She argued against paying men more because they are the "head of the family." She noted that it is debatable whether or not woman have dependents and that bachelors, without dependents, would not take lower wages than married men. The belief that women are less productive than men was considered, but Gilson was able to find cases where women were more productive, but paid less. The fear that highly paid women might

forego motherhood was given the comment, "It is safe to assume...that human nature and age long instincts will prove more powerful than a money incentive...." [11, p. 40]. One of the greatest difficulties for women to overcome is what she called the "vested interest of the male," or, more crudely, men's fear of women's growing economic independence. She argued,

> when all is said and done, the solution of the problem of women's wages seems to lie in basic philosophies and viewpoints and not in any particular technique or method. Primarily there must be full recognition of the justice of equal opportunity, of the release of individual powers. All obstacles to advancement and unhampered expression of ability must be removed...women must be willing to 'play the game,' but in the interest of fair mindedness and justice is it asking too much if we expect men to 'play the game' too, and to observe the rules of honest, clean sportsmanship? [11, p. 42]

CONCLUSION

Mary B. Gilson stands out as a major figure in the early years of personnel management. She assisted in the implementation of scientific management into the Clothcraft shop and united it with human relations to form a unique bond between worker and company. Mary Gilson was one of the pioneer leaders whose work and ideas were decades ahead of those of the majority of industry.

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