

## Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



# The Progressive HRM Paradigm: A Theoretical and Empirical Re-Examination

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Volume 46, numéro 2, 1991

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/050675ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/050675ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)  
1703-8138 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Godard, J. (1991). The Progressive HRM Paradigm: A Theoretical and Empirical Re-Examination. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 46(2), 378–400. <https://doi.org/10.7202/050675ar>

### Résumé de l'article

Au cours de la dernière décennie, on a de plus en plus préconisé un paradigme avant-gardiste en gestion des ressources humaines comme alternative au système antagoniste de relations du travail qui prévalait dans les années de l'après-guerre. Ce paradigme ne semble toutefois pas aussi généralisé et aussi efficace que ne le croient ses promoteurs. Nous avons identifié six raisons pour lesquelles son efficacité est limitée: 1) juridiquement les travailleurs sont exclus de la conception, des résultats et des avantages de leur travail; 2) les employeurs cherchent à maximiser les profits en subordonnant à cet objectif les intérêts des salariés; 3) les relations de travail sont, d'un point de vue juridique, autocratiques par définition; 4) le contrat de travail est, de sa nature même, vague ou diffus; 5) la plupart des travailleurs occupent des postes subalternes; 6) une grande partie des tâches qu'ils effectuent sont généralement routinières et monotones. Réunis, ces facteurs soulèvent un problème de contrôle administratif, et même si des méthodes avant-gardistes sont de nature à favoriser la rectification de cet état de choses, elles ne peuvent en extirper les causes profondes.

Ainsi, tout en reconnaissant qu'elles peuvent entraîner certains changements, ceux-ci sont naturellement limités. De plus, nous estimons qu'il n'est que normal pour les employeurs de recourir à de telles méthodes uniquement dans la mesure où les avantages qu'ils en tirent (conflits moins fréquents, meilleurs rendements) dépassent les coûts (coûts des salaires et des programmes, etc.). Ceci dépend: 1) du pouvoir des salariés de quitter leur emploi, de faire la grève et de contrôler leurs conditions de travail; 2) des attitudes antérieures des employés; 3) des économies dans les coûts de gestion et 4) du prix à payer pour l'efficacité des méthodes avant-gardistes par rapport à des moyens plus 'directs' de contrôle. Résultat: ces méthodes de gestion sont davantage sujettes à être adoptées par les grandes entreprises qui possèdent des établissements considérables, utilisant une technologie complexe et à grande concentration de capital et fabricant des biens ou donnant des services essentiels ou non standards destinés à des marchés concentrés.

Enfin, nous avons recueilli un ensemble complet de données auprès de cent entreprises syndiquées canadiennes afin de connaître les 'effets' des méthodes dites d'avant-garde sur l'efficacité de l'organisation. Les résultats correspondent en grande partie à nos attentes: a) les méthodes dites d'avant-garde ont tendance à produire des effets positifs, mais peu importants; b) ce sont surtout les grandes entreprises, possédant de vastes unités de production à forte concentration de capital, dotées de technologies de pointe et fonctionnant sur des marchés concentrés qui y recourent.

Le paradigme avant-gardisme en gestion des ressources humaines ne peut être associé à un modèle global en relations industrielles. En effet, il ne peut servir de substitut aux dispositions institutionnelles qui permettent et reconnaissent la légitimité du conflit. Il est plutôt nécessaire de renforcer les droits légaux des salariés et de leurs représentants, de telle sorte qu'ils puissent participer en toute égalité aux décisions traditionnellement dévolues aux employeurs.

# ***The Progressive HRM Paradigm***

## ***A Theoretical and Empirical Re-Examination***

**John Godard**

*This paper argues that the 'progressive paradigm' — as it may be referred to — is at best oversimplified. It proceeds in three parts. Part one develops a critique of the two assumptions underlying this paradigm, arguing first that underlying sources of conflict inherent to work organizations and employment relations limit the effectiveness of progressive policies and practices, and, second, that the extent to which these policies and practices are economically rational and hence likely to be adopted varies in accordance with firm and industry-level structural variables. Following from this critique, part two draws upon a comprehensive set of survey data collected in 1980-81 from 100 unionized Canadian firms to explore both the effectiveness of, and structural variation in, progressive managerial practices. In part three, the implications of the analysis are briefly discussed.*

Over the past decade, the study of industrial relations (IR) has been characterized by a growing preoccupation with managerial strategies, policies, and practices (cf Sisson and Sullivan 1987). In the mainstream of the field, this preoccupation has been accompanied by two related developments: (a) a growing integration of the human resources management (HRM) literature into the study of IR (and vice versa; see Strauss 1987), and (b) a movement away from the deterministic approach characterizing much IR research in the 1970s (especially behavioral research: see Capelli 1985) to one which places much greater emphasis upon managerial choice processes. These developments in turn suggest a normative shift, one which is consistent with ideologies stressing cooperation and teamwork and denying the legitimacy of more adversarial, arms-length relations institutionalized within post-war collective bargaining laws

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\*\* The author thanks Tony Giles for his comments on an earlier version of this paper.

(Barkin 1989). A number of assumptions seem to underly this shift, but two are perhaps paramount: (1) the achievement of harmonious labour-management relations is primarily (though by no means entirely) a matter of adopting progressive human resource management policies, (2) failure to fully embrace these policies (in some form) reflects faulty managerial values and beliefs, rather than a rational, profit maximizing choice within a given decision context.

This paper argues that the 'progressive paradigm' — as it may be referred to<sup>1</sup> is at best oversimplified. It proceeds in three parts. Part one develops a critique of the two assumptions underlying this paradigm, arguing first that underlying sources of conflict inherent to work organizations and employment relations limit the effectiveness of progressive policies and practices, and, second, that the extent to which these policies and practices are economically rational and hence likely to be adopted varies in accordance with firm and industry-level structural variables. Following from this critique, part two draws upon a comprehensive set of survey data collected in 1980-81 from 100 unionized Canadian firms to explore both the effectiveness of, and structural variation in, progressive managerial practices. In part three, the implications of the analysis are briefly discussed.

## ASSESSING THE PROGRESSIVE PARADIGM

Progressive human resource management policies and practices have a long history in western capitalist economies, finding their genesis in early welfare capitalist schemes emergent at the beginning of this century, and proliferating rapidly with the growth of personnel departments in the 1920s (Kochan and Capelli 1984; Baron, Dobbin, and Jennings 1986). Yet they have also had a checkered history: only a limited number of welfare capitalist schemes survived the developments of the 1930s, and, despite widespread advocacy of participative management and job enrichment by managerial scholars in the 1950s and 1960s, these and related approaches appear to have enjoyed only limited practical acceptance throughout most of the post-war era. According to a number of accounts, this has changed over the past decade, so much so that labour-management relations are undergoing a transformation, away from the adversarial, job control model of post-war years to a more cooperative, problem solving one (Kochan and Piore 1984; Kochan, Katz, and McKersie 1986; Hecksher 1988). But there is

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1 The term 'progressive paradigm' is meant to include both more traditional 'welfare capitalist'/human relations practices and more recent 'participation/job enrichment' schemes variously associated with 'QWL', 'socio-technical systems', and 'quality circles'.

little firm evidence (at least, as of this writing) that the progressive paradigm has been fully adopted by more than a limited number of large, core sector employers (Freund and Epstein 1984; Kochan, Katz, and McKersie 1986:153). Though general surveys suggest that various elements of this paradigm have been quite widely diffused (Long 1989), these surveys often suffer from unsatisfactory response rates<sup>2</sup> and rely solely upon managerial reports as to whether various 'innovations' have been attempted somewhere within their organization. They fall far short of providing evidence of a transformation<sup>3</sup>.

More troubling, while there can be little doubt that the programs and practices associated with this paradigm can have positive implications for both satisfaction and performance, there is little to suggest that they often have the transformative effects assumed by their proponents. For example, numerous quantitative studies have observed positive 'effects' for worker participation schemes (cf Miller and Monge 1987; Levine and Tyson 1990), but these are often weak and may in many cases be artifactual, reflecting flawed research designs (Cotton *et al.* 1988; Wagner and Gooding 1987; Russell 1988). In a meta-analysis of the participation literature, Wagner and Gooding (1987) found a mean correlation of .39 between participation and its assumed outcomes when data were obtained from the same respondents using the same questionnaire at the same time, but a mean correlation of only .12 when data were collected from multiple sources. Moreover, in their study of 25 manufacturing facilities, Katz, Kochan, and Weber raise the specter of causality, finding that "plants with comparatively good industrial relations performance tend to develop relatively more extensive QWL involvement, and not vice versa" (1985: 522). Finally, in a carefully designed study of two electronics manufacturing plants, Griffin (1988) found that the initially positive effects of quality circles disappeared over time.

There *have* been numerous case studies reporting positive effects for progressive HRM practices (cf Gold 1986), but these studies are more often than not impressionistic and may reflect the preconceptions and biases of

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2 For example, in the survey reported by Long (1989), the response rate was only 19 %, suggesting a serious selection bias.

3 This is especially true with respect to worker participation/QWL schemes. Kanter *et al.* (1986), for example, found that less than one quarter of American Management Association member firms had adopted quality circles as of 1986 — even though quality circles would appear to be the most popular method of increasing employee involvement. In a survey of Canadian firms, Long (1989) found that only 14 % of respondents reported quality circles. Though 65 % reported some form of innovation, the definition of innovation was so broad as to encompass 'labour-management' committees, which are required by law in a number of jurisdictions for establishments above a given size.

their authors, who are typically advocates of progressive IR/HRM policies and often rely primarily upon information provided by management (Blackler and Brown 1978). Moreover, follow-ups to these studies, when conducted, often find that the original program has been either scaled down or discontinued altogether (Berg *et al.* 1978; Nightingale 1984; Gold 1986). Thus, the incidence of highly successful cases may be far lower than these analyses suggest.

Proponents have advanced a variety of reasons for the limited adoption and effectiveness of these programs (Levitan and Johnson 1983; Lawler 1986; Gold 1986). Generally, these fall under one of three related explanations: (1) either managers or union officials (mistakenly) resist these programs; (2) these programs often do not go far enough, and; (3) these programs are often not properly implemented and sustained. While each of these explanations is by no means implausible, they all suggest that: (a) progressive policies and practices *can* be widely effective — if implemented properly, and (b) the failure to properly implement these policies and practices is not rational. Yet, after close to a century over which these policies and practices have been advocated in one form or another, there comes a point when everyone might be better served by going beyond 'surface appearances' and searching for *underlying* limitations to these programs — even if this entails questioning the assumptions on which they are based.

Below, I will argue, first, that the effectiveness of the progressive paradigm is inherently limited due to the underlying nature of labour-management relations, and, second, that the extent to which it is rational for management to adopt this paradigm varies systematically with 'structural' variables, thereby helping to explain variation in the extent to which it is adopted.

### **Limits to the Effectiveness of the Progressive Paradigm**

Four underlying explanations can be advanced for the limited effectiveness of progressive programs and practices. First, and most fundamentally, when workers enter into an employment relation, they legally alienate themselves from the right to own or control the process, product, and proceeds of their labour. In other words, their labour is — at least legally — not their own, but somebody else's. Thus, they have little *objective* reason to develop more than an instrumental orientation to their work, regardless of how progressive managerial practices are. Indeed, employer incentive schemes notwithstanding, workers have no *a priori* reason to provide more than the minimum amount of work necessary to maintain their jobs, yet

every reason to seek the most favourable terms of employment possible. While workers may of course believe they have a moral obligation to their employer, the legal alienation embodied within the employment relation serves as an important impediment to the development and realization of such an obligation.

Second, managers — though also employees — in effect serve as ‘agents’ of owners (Williamson 1975). Though the intensity and efficacy with which they engage in the rational pursuit of profit may vary considerably, they are subject to both external constraints (i.e. product market, ownership) and social influence processes which ensure that this objective receives primacy in the exercise of authority (Herman 1981). In industrial relations, the rational pursuit of profit — or what can be referred to as ‘profit rationality’ — in essence translates into maximizing the performance of workers and minimizing per unit labour costs. This conflicts directly with the interests of workers, so that, regardless of whether the parties have an overarching common interest in the survival and growth of the firm (as HRM advocates argue), a fundamental ‘structural’ antagonism underlies their relationship (cf. Bowles 1985). This antagonism by no means prevents the parties from developing and maintaining a cooperative relationship, but it greatly enhances the difficulty of doing so.

Third, the employment relation is one of authority, in which workers find themselves in positions of subordination (Hyman 1977). No doubt, employers may exercise their authority benevolently, and they may even provide workers or their leaders with extensive opportunities to participate in decisions involving the exercise of this authority. Moreover, organization of a union provides workers with the right to participate in the determination of their terms of employment and to seek redress through the grievance process if treated unfairly. But none of this alters the fundamental nature of the employment relation: workers remain in positions of subordination, with no legal right to elect or appoint their rulers and little if any effective say in strategic managerial decisions which can have critical implications for their well being. This, coupled with the structural antagonism underlying the employment relation, means that trust and legitimacy are always problematic.

Fourth, the employment contract is inherently indeterminate: workers ‘sell’ their ability to labour rather than a specified *amount* of labour (Offe 1985). While conditions (rules and procedures) establishing how that labour is to be provided can be specified in some measure, they can rarely be specified in full. As a result, questions of fairness and equity as to both the pace and the conditions of work always lie beneath the surface (Edwards

1979). These questions are in turn aggravated by both the structural antagonisms characterizing, and the authoritarian nature of, the employment relation.

For better or worse, these four factors are fundamental to capitalist employment relations, in essence defining them. But complicating matters are two further characteristics seemingly endemic to developed western economies: (1) most workers find themselves at or near the bottom of a highly stratified income and status hierarchy, both in the organization for which they work and in society; (2) workers more often than not find themselves performing routine and monotonous tasks (Rinehart 1987). These of course fall (in part) under the purview of managerial choice processes: indeed, the progressive paradigm typically advocates a reduction of income and status differences *and* job redesign. Yet the *extent* to which they are practically alterable is another matter, perhaps explaining why workers themselves typically accept the conditions of their employment as given. At the same time, they give rise to generalized resentment and negative or at best instrumental work orientations.

Combined, these factors give rise to the managerial problem of control, and it is this problem which progressive management practices are meant to address. Yet progressive practices cannot eradicate these factors: instead, they can only attempt to mitigate their consequences. No doubt, the adoption of these practices can make a difference: if workers are treated favourably, they are more likely to respond favourably. Moreover, it is undoubtedly *possible* to elicit high levels of trust and commitment. The argument, however, is that, because of the factors identified above, the attainment of high levels of trust and commitment is far more difficult than often assumed, and far more fragile than typically recognized. Thus, when proponents of the progressive paradigm argue that its limited effectiveness is attributable to managerial or union resistance, to piecemeal applications of the paradigm, or to poor implementation and maintenance, they are not necessarily wrong. But they are failing to go far enough, to establish *why* these problems arise.

### **Limits to the Adoption of the Progressive Paradigm**

Though the failure to account for underlying sources of conflict represents a serious limitation to the progressive paradigm, perhaps a more serious limitation is the failure to recognize that the varied adoption of this paradigm may reflect rational managerial decisions. According to Kochan, McKersie, and Capelli (1984), this variation can be accounted for primarily

by differences in managerial values, though once 'environmental pressures' become strong enough these values change, and some variant of the progressive paradigm is adopted. The inference to be drawn is that the progressive paradigm is both rational and desirable and that failure to adopt it reflects a mistaken managerial strategy. In contrast, the position adopted here is that the extent to which it is profit rational to adopt progressive practices can vary considerably in accordance with firm-level structural variables, and that this comes over time to be *reflected* in managerial choices and ultimately in the extent to which progressive practices are adopted. This position is developed more fully elsewhere, as part of a structural theory of the firm in IR (Godard 1990). Here, it will only be briefly outlined, beginning with two key premises underlying the theory.

The first premise is that the adoption of the progressive paradigm can entail substantial expenditures. These expenditures can include the hiring of HRM specialists, the costs of orientation and training programs, the provision of more favourable wages and benefits than otherwise, and so forth. Perhaps most important, however, this paradigm can engender a sacrifice of 'technical' rationality in the workplace, as line managers find themselves constrained in the exercise of authority and having to concern themselves more with human relations than with maximizing output (cf. Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall 1988:455).

Second, while progressive practices undoubtedly bring benefits, these benefits are not always sufficient to justify their costs. In this respect, we can for analytical purposes assume that there are, on-the-whole, diminishing marginal returns to expenditures on progressive management practices: it is relatively inexpensive to obtain the acquiescence of workers and hence establish a relatively stable IR climate, but in view of the underlying nature of the employment relation, to obtain the high levels of trust and commitment assumed by the progressive paradigm can be extremely costly. Thus, at relatively low levels of expenditure management can expect relatively high marginal returns, while at relatively high levels management can expect relatively low marginal returns.

It follows from these two premises that there comes a point at which the benefits of further expenditures no longer justify the costs. This point can vary considerably across firms, so that while it may in some cases be rational to adopt highly progressive practices, it may in other cases be rational to eschew these practices altogether. Four sets of considerations account for variation in the point at which this occurs<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> These arguments are developed more fully and demonstrated logically in Godard 1990.



First, is worker exit, strike, and job power, each of which varies with the extent to which, respectively, worker exit, strike activity, and on-the-job 'neglect' can entail costs for management. To the extent that these costs are high, it is profit rational for management to 'invest' higher levels of expenditure in progressive policies and practices, for the returns to each dollar invested are likely to be higher (all things equal).

Second, is the extent to which management enjoys various 'economies' in the costs associated with progressive practices. Particularly important are scale economies which enable firms to hire a cadre of human resource specialists, to mount in-house training and orientation programs, and to administer sophisticated benefit and evaluation programs. To the extent that these economies obtain, the returns for each dollar 'invested' (per worker) in progressive practices are higher, and it is hence profit rational to adopt more progressive practices than otherwise.

Third, is worker 'prior' consciousness, or the attitudes and beliefs of workers exclusive of managerial practices. To the extent that workers would otherwise have negative or 'problematic' attitudes and beliefs, initial expenditures directed at altering these attitudes and beliefs are likely to have higher returns than otherwise.

Fourth, is the relative cost effectiveness of progressive practices. As both radical and managerial scholars have long recognized, these practices constitute only one method of achieving control, intended to do so *indirectly*, through worker values and attitudes. An alternative, more direct method (cf. Friedman 1977), is to impose 'structural' constraints upon workers, through close supervision, 'bureaucratic' rules and procedures, or highly structured work processes. These constraints may — as their critics argue — have unintended 'side-effects', resulting in negative work orientations. However, they may nonetheless be more cost-effective under certain circumstances — particularly where there is little uncertainty or complexity in the workplace. Where this is the case, workers are more readily controlled by less expensive 'technical' and 'bureaucratic' means (Edwards 1979), and their values and attitudes may be of less importance. Thus, to the extent that uncertainty and complexity are high, it is cost effective to rely more extensively upon progressive practices; otherwise, alternative means are more cost effective.

In short, the extent to which progressive practices are consistent with the rational pursuit of profit depends upon: (1) worker exit, strike, and job power; (2) management cost-economies, (3) worker 'prior consciousness', (4) and the relative cost effectiveness of alternative means of control. These considerations in turn vary systematically in accordance with a number of variables. Three sets of structural variables are of particular importance.

First, progressive practices are likely to be more profit rational for large employers with large establishment sizes: not only do these employers enjoy various cost-economies, worker consciousness is generally more problematic due to the alienating effects of size (cf. Eisele 1974; Stern 1976, Hodson 1986).

Second, progressive practices are likely to be more profit rational in capital intensive firms with uncertain and complex technologies, requiring high levels of formal and informal training, and employing advanced mass or process production techniques. Where this is the case: (a) worker exit power is high, due to the costs to employers of training replacements; (b) worker strike power is high, due to the high levels of capital investment per worker and the difficulties in relying upon temporary replacements; (c) worker job power is high, due to the complexity of the technology and the level of capital investment; (d) progressive practices are likely to be more cost-effective, due to the level of uncertainty and complexity.

Third, progressive practices are likely to be more profit rational in firms producing essential or unstandardized goods and services, with a high rate of capacity utilization, and operating in concentrated markets. Where a firm's product is essential, strikes are more disruptive and hence costly, as are product quality problems: if so, worker strike and job power are likely to be higher. Where goods and services are unstandardized, greater flexibility is required, as reflected in greater uncertainty and complexity: thus progressive practices are more cost effective. Finally, where capacity utilization and market concentration are high, workers are much less likely to fear job loss as a result of recalcitrance or strike activity, and much more likely to expect favourable treatment from management. As a result, worker consciousness is likely to be more problematic. Moreover, the costs of lost output due to strike activity or of production problems due to recalcitrance or high exit rates are likely to be greater, thereby enhancing worker power.

To argue that size, technology, and market conditions determine the extent to which it is profit rational for management to adopt progressive practices is, of course, by no means to suggest that they strictly determine variation in these practices. It is to suggest, however, that failure to adopt the progressive paradigm in its entirety may not reflect faulty managerial values or mistaken strategic choices as much as it does cost-benefit considerations consistent with the rational pursuit of profit — considerations that vary in accordance with structural variables. Though there are undoubtedly limits to managerial rationality, it would be mistaken to think that these considerations do not lie at the core of managerial decision processes or that they do not come over time to be reflected in the extent to

which progressive practices are adopted. Indeed, following the lead of decision process theorists in organizational behavior (cf. Pfeffer 1982:105-117), it may well be that managerial values and beliefs in part evolve retrospectively, as rationalizations of prior decisions and the learning processes associated with them. Thus, not only may values and beliefs be of less importance than structural variables, it may be that they serve more as rationalizations for, rather than determinants of, the extent to which these practices are adopted.

### **EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: THE ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF PROGRESSIVE PRACTICES**

The analysis so far rests upon two primary arguments. First, though progressive practices may be associated with more harmonious labour-management relations, underlying sources of conflict render this association weaker and more tenuous than often assumed. Second, the extent to which it is rational for management to adopt progressive practices varies systematically in accordance with size, technology, and market variables, and these variables, moreso than managerial values and beliefs per se, account for variation in the diffusion of the progressive paradigm throughout the economy. This section draws upon a set of micro-level data in an attempt to shed light upon these arguments.

#### **Data and Expectations**

The data drawn upon were collected as part of a comprehensive mail survey of unionized Canadian firms conducted in 1980-81. This survey consisted of two questionnaires concerning the firm's major bargaining unit and the production and distribution of the primary good or service of this bargaining unit: the senior management official for industrial relations in the company was asked to complete the first questionnaire and send the second to the senior industrial relations official in the primary plant or operating unit within the major bargaining unit (*if* he or she was not that person). Thus, the first questionnaire requested information more likely to be available at the company level, while the second requested workplace level data. Of approximately 300 unionized firms surveyed, 147 agreed to participate, of which 112 were in the manufacturing sector. However, because of missing data problems, only 100 cases are included in this analysis. Table 1 lists the variables included in the analysis, gives a brief description of how each is operationalized, and provides descriptive statistics.

**Table 1**  
**(Progressiveness)**

**Measures of Variables and Descriptive Statistics**

<i>Climate Variables</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
STRIKEDAYS (days lost to strike activity, previous 3 years)	100	16.46	48.12
HOSTILITY (worker-supervisory relations: average of 10 Likert-type items, where 1 = minimum hostility, 7 = maximum)	100	5.07	1.23
GRIEVRATE (grievances per 1,000 employees, most recent year)	96	75.88	98.06
ABSENT (average days absent per employee, most recent year)	86	8.70	5.28
QUIT (quits per 1,000 employees, most recent year)	81	66.2	53.5
WILDCAT (whether one or more wildcats occurred, most recent year)	96	.07	.26
<i>Management Practices</i>			
PROGRESSIVENESS (sum of 12 items representing progressive practices, where 0 = not adopted, 1 = adopted: see table 2)	100	6.62	2.63
<i>Structural Variables</i>			
LEMPsize (log of total company employees in Canada)*	100	4,779	2,120
LESTAB (log of average number of full-time operatives over past year x 1/2 average part-time, major operating unit)*	100	1,038	2,120
CAPITAL (the value of production facilities in the major operating unit/LESTAB before transformation)	69	22,550	46,400
RIGID (sum of: waiting time is possible between successive stages, yes = 0, no = 1; sequence of operations can be varied, yes = 0, no = 1; buffer stocks are held, yes = 0, no = 1; breakdown stops all operations, yes = 1, no = 0; breakdown stops some other operations, yes = 1, no = 0; rerouting of work possible if breakdown, yes = 0, no = 1)	100	2.46	1.5
AUTOMAT (1 = manual operation, no mechanical power, 2 = manual control, mechanical power, 3 = semiautomatic, set and reset by operative, 4 = automatic, sets and resets itself, 5 = self-correcting, self monitoring and adjusting, 6 = self-adapting, adjusts to unscheduled input variation)	100	2.89	.6

STD (extent to which product is standardized: 1 = produced to individual customer requirements, to 4 = highly standardized)	100	2.8	1.02
PROCESS (whether continuous process production: 0 = no, 1 = yes)	100	.33	.47
PACE (whether work pace varies; 0 = yes, 1 = no)	100	.6	.46
SPECSKILL (months of formal skill training or apprenticeship for most typical job)	100	9.5	18.37
MKTCONC (combined market share of four most dominant firms in market: 1 = less than 20 %, to 5 = over 80 %)	100	4.12	1.17
ESSENTIAL (estimated difficulty to consumers of going without the product: 1 = very minor, to 7 = very great)	100	5.38	1.97
CAPACITY (extent to which primary operating unit was at capacity over previous year: 1 = under 70 %; 2 = 70 to 80 %; 3 = 81 to 90 %; 4 = 91 to 100 %; 5 = over 100 %)	93	3.0	1.08
<i>Control Variables</i>			
HISTORY (days lost to strikes over first seven years of preceding decade)	100	.81	.954

\* Mean and S.D. *before* transformation to loglinear form.

The key variable in the analysis is PROGRESSIVENESS, which is an additive index including twelve items normally associated with progressive management practices, obtained at the establishment level. These items and their descriptive statistics appear in table 2; the inter-item reliability score (KR-20) is .61.

Six labour relations 'climate' variables are included: STRIKEDAYS, which is the number of work days lost to strikes over the preceding three years; HOSTILITY, which is a ten item additive index adapted from Gandz (1977) and measuring respondent perceptions of worker-supervisory relations in the workplace (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ); GRIEVRATE, which is the number of written grievances per thousand workers over the preceding year; ABSENT, which is the estimated average number of days of absenteeism per worker over the preceding year; QUIT, which is the number of voluntary quits per thousand workers over the preceding year and; WILDCAT, which is a dummy variable indicating whether there had

been one or more wildcat strikes over the preceding year. Generally, we would expect PROGRESSIVENESS to be negatively associated with each of these variables.

**Table 2**  
**Progressiveness (n = 100)**

	NO	YES		NO	YES
Company sponsored parties or outings for operatives	41	59	A doctor or nurse	33	67
Company supported social or sports clubs	31	69	A merit pay system	91	9
A suggestion system	61	39	Special recognition for lengthy service	18	82
Profit-sharing	91	9	Special recognition for dependable service	81	19
A weekly or monthly company 'house' journal	40	60	Human skills training program for supervisors	14	86
A counselor/social worker	80	20	Orientation program for new hires	24	76

Twelve structural variables are included: LEMPLOYER, which is the log of employer size; LESTAB, which is the log of the number of workers in the primary establishment; CAPITAL which is the level of capital investment per worker; RIGID, which is a six item additive index adapted from Hickson *et al.* (1969) and measuring the degree of interdependence in the workflow (KR-20 = .51); PACE, which is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the pacing of the workflow is fixed; PROCESS, which is a dichotomous variable indicating whether continuous process production characterizes the workflow; AUTOMAT, which is a six point scale adapted from Hickson *et al.* (1969) and indicating the level of automation most typical of the workflow; SPECSKILL, which is the weeks of formal or informal training necessary to perform jobs 'most typical' of the workflow; STD, which is the extent to which the good or service produced is standardized; ESSENTIAL, which is the extent to which a shortage of supply is likely to cause hardship for consumers of the good or service; CAPACITY, which is the extent to which the establishment is operating at or above capacity; and MKTCONC, which is the percent of industry sales accounted for by the four largest firms in the primary market over which the good or

service is sold. Generally, the expectation is that these variables will bear positive associations with PROGRESSIVENESS, with two exceptions: PACE and STD. Where PACE suggests 'technical control' (thereby reducing the need for progressive practices), STD suggests low uncertainty and hence that progressive practices may be less cost-effective than more direct means.

Finally, two control variables are included: HISTORY, or the number of strikes over the past decade, excluding the three years immediately preceding the survey, and CAPMISS, which is a dummy variable indicating whether the value for CAPITAL is missing. The inclusion of HISTORY is warranted to control for cause-effect problems in the relationships between PROGRESSIVENESS and the climate variables, by eliminating variation in PROGRESSIVENESS attributable to conflict prior to the period for which the climate measures apply. The inclusion of CAPMISS is intended to control for possible selection biases introduced by the high portion (31%) of missing values for CAPITAL (see Maddala 1977:202).

At the outset it should be stressed that the analysis below can in no way be viewed as an unequivocal 'test' of the progressive paradigm or of the arguments advanced in the preceding section. Not only is the data restricted to unionized firms<sup>5</sup>, the measure of managerial practices excludes a number of considerations considered central to the progressive paradigm — especially whether labour-management committees have been established and 'quality circles' implemented. Moreover, there are certain weaknesses in the climate measures — particularly in the measure of HOSTILITY, which is perceptual. All the same, the analysis can provide (or fail to provide) support for the arguments above, and can contribute to the rather thin body of multivariate research accumulated to date.

## Findings

The analysis proceeds in two stages. First, the six climate variables are regressed on PROGRESSIVENESS, with and without the structural variables and HISTORY<sup>6</sup>. Then, PROGRESSIVENESS is regressed on the structural variables. Mean substitution is employed in the event of missing values for independent variables.

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5 Exclusion of nonunion firms may bias the results. Notably, however, recent research by Kelley and Harrison (1990) suggests that progressive HRM programs are *more* successful in union firms, finding virtually no effect for these programs in nonunion firms.

6 Because STRIKEDAYS, is a half-way dichotomous variable, Tobit analysis is used for this variable; otherwise OLS is employed. Probit analysis would be more appropriate for WILDCAT, but could not be performed due to the skewed response distribution for this variable.

Table 3 reports the PROGRESSIVENESS coefficients for the climate regressions: with the exception of the QUITRATE regressions, all are significant at the .10 level or more and in the expected direction once the structural variables are in. Thus, these findings establish the empirical validity of PROGRESSIVENESS and indicate that progressive practices do indeed 'make a difference'. But the data also suggest that this difference may not be a particularly strong one: PROGRESSIVENESS fails to account for more than four percent of the variance in any of the climate variables, and significantly increases the variance explained by the structural variables alone in only the HOSTILITY, GRIEVRATE, and ABSENT regressions. This may reflect weaknesses in the data set, but it *is* consistent with the first argument of this paper: though progressive practices *do* make a difference, this difference is a limited one.

**Table 3**  
**Regressions of the Effects of Progressiveness**  
**on IR Climate Variables**

<i>Dependent Variables</i>	<i>Regressions with PROGRESSIVENESS only</i>		<i>Full regressions<sup>a</sup></i>		<i>Additional Variation Explained<sup>c</sup></i>
	<i>B<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>R<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>B<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>R<sup>2</sup></i>	
STRIKEDAYS <sup>d</sup>	-30.22	.03	-7.50 <sup>3</sup>	.24	.02
HOSTILITY	-.05 <sup>3</sup>	.02	-.09 <sup>2</sup>	.18	.03 <sup>3</sup>
GRIEVRATE	-7.15 <sup>2</sup>	.04	-10.47 <sup>2</sup>	.14	.04 <sup>2</sup>
ABSENT	-1.51	.01	-5.10 <sup>2</sup>	.20	.03 <sup>3</sup>
QUIT	-1.13	.00	-2.63	.23	.01
WILDCAT	-.00	.00	-.02 <sup>3</sup>	.32	.01

a = full regressions include all structural and control variables in Table 1.

b = unstandardized coefficients for PROGRESSIVENESS

c = calculated by subtracting the variances explained by the structural and control variables alone (unreported) from the variance explained by the structural and control variables and progressiveness combined

d = Tobit analysis; R<sup>2</sup> is squared correlation between expected and observed values

1 = p < .01 level, one tailed test

2 = p < .05 level, one tailed test

3 = p < .10 level, one tailed test



Table 4 reports zero order correlations and coefficients for the regression of PROGRESSIVENESS on the structural variables. This regression provides strong support for the second argument of this paper: that progressive practices do vary systematically and that this variation *tends* to be profit rational. To begin, the coefficients are statistically significant and in the expected direction for LEMPLOYER, LESTAB, CAPITAL and PROCESS. These results suggest that progressive practices are more likely to be profit rational for large employers with large establishments and capital intense, process technologies, and that, as such, they are more likely to be adopted.

**Table 4**  
**Structural Variation in Progressiveness**

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>B</i>
LEMPLOYER	.34 <sup>1</sup>	.36 <sup>3</sup>
LESTAB	.44 <sup>1</sup>	1.0 <sup>1</sup>
CAPITAL	.10 <sup>3</sup>	1.1 <sup>2</sup>
PROCESS	.14 <sup>2</sup>	.94 <sup>2</sup>
PACE	-.24 <sup>1</sup>	-.92 <sup>2</sup>
RIGID	(-.30 <sup>1</sup> )	(-.65 <sup>1</sup> )
AUTOMAT	.08	2.2 <sup>1</sup>
AUTOMAT <sup>2</sup>	.08	.33
SPECSKILL	.00	.00
STD	-.04	.09
ESSENTIAL	(-.01)	(-.12)
CAPACITY	.07	.11
MKTCONC	.20 <sup>1</sup>	.51 <sup>1</sup>
CAPMISS	.00	.58
R <sup>2</sup>		.47

3 =  $p < .10$  level; 2 =  $p < .05$  level; 1 =  $p < .01$  level; brackets indicate opposite-from-expected signs and hence two-tailed tests, otherwise one tailed tests of significance.

The coefficients are also significant and in the expected (negative) direction for PACE, indicating that highly paced technologies embody 'technical control' and hence require less 'indirect' control. This argument

is strengthened by the highly significant negative coefficient for RIGID: though in the opposite-from-expected direction, this finding indicates that RIGID technologies also embody technical control.

The coefficient for AUTOMAT was initially insignificant, so it was decided to introduce a quadratic term to explore for nonlinearity, following the lead of previous research on the implications of automation (Woodward 1965; Lincoln, Hanada, and McBride 1985). The results reveal a significant positive effect for AUTOMAT, and an insignificant negative effect for its squared value. It would thus appear that increases in automation give rise to increases in progressiveness only up to a point, beyond which further increases may, if anything, begin to be associated with decreases<sup>7</sup>.

The coefficient for SPECSKILL is in the expected direction but not statistically significant. This is consistent with the insignificant coefficient for PROGRESSIVENESS in the QUIT regression. If, as earlier argued, specific skills are important because of their implications for the costs to management of quits (i.e. exit power), and progressive practices have no effect on the quit rate, then it is not profit rational to adopt more progressive practices in response to high exit power.

Finally, are the coefficients for STD, ESSENTIAL, CAPACITY, and MKTCONC. Of these variables, only MKTCONC is statistically significant in the expected direction. Otherwise, it would appear the produce market-related variables are not of much value for explaining variation in PROGRESSIVENESS.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued that the progressive paradigm is at best oversimplified: not only do underlying sources of conflict endemic to the employment relation limit the effectiveness of progressive practices, the conditions under which these practices are implemented largely reflect structural considerations associated with the rational pursuit of profit rather than managerial 'values' per se. It has also reported empirical findings which, though by no means providing an unequivocal 'test' of the progressive paradigm, are consistent with these arguments. While progressive practices do appear to be associated with lower conflict on a

<sup>7</sup> The estimated bend point is 3.27, obtained by setting the partial derivative of PROGRESSIVE with respect to AUTOMAT to zero, so that, given the equation  $y = a + bx + cx^2 + e$ , the derivative with respect to  $x$  is  $b + 2cx$  (see Berry and Feldman 1985:57-60). A value of 3.0 on the AUTOMAT scale represents 'semiautomatic'; thus it is roughly once this level of automation has been reached that automation ceases to induce increases in progressiveness.

number of dimensions, these associations are weak. Moreover, as expected under the assumption of profit rationality, progressive practices are more likely to be adopted by large employers with large, technologically advanced establishments and operating in concentrated markets.

If the arguments and findings of this paper are correct, then there are important implications both for public policy and for the practice of industrial relations. At the policy level, they suggest that current institutional arrangements give rise to a 'problem' of control and that this problem is both difficult and costly to overcome. Hence, systematically altering these arrangements might in the long run be more economically rational. For example, a system based upon worker ownership would eliminate underlying sources of conflict and provide the basis for true democracy in the workplace (Bowles and Gintis 1986). To make such an argument, however, raises a whole host of issues concerning the viability and desirability of worker ownership — issues which cannot be addressed here.

On a more immediate, practical level, the analysis suggests that scholars who view the progressive paradigm as a panacea for the future may be barking up the wrong tree. This is not to argue that workers should not be progressively treated, or even that management should adopt progressive practices only where profit rational. As the data suggest, these practices do have positive implications for behavioral outcomes; they can also undoubtedly enhance the quality of worker employment experiences. But it is to recognize that this paradigm is fraught with difficulties *as an overarching paradigm for the practice of IR*.

If proponents are serious about enhancing the level of labour-management cooperation, then they should at minimum actively promote *legal* rights and protections capable of fostering genuine participation in areas traditionally considered solely within the domain of management (cf. Block 1990). Doing so will not eliminate underlying sources of conflict, but it *will* enable workers and their representatives to confront employers as *true equals*, thereby helping to reduce the resentment and mistrust arising out of the asymmetrical nature of contemporary employment relations. Indeed, it is time that labour leaders took the offensive, demanding the rights and protections necessary for a system of genuine participation. To do so would only be consistent with both the economic and moral claims of contemporary proponents of the progressive paradigm, yet it could strengthen the role and legitimacy of the labour movement immeasurably.

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### ***Le paradigme avant-gardiste en gestion des ressources humaines***

Au cours de la dernière décennie, on a de plus en plus préconisé un paradigme avant-gardiste en gestion des ressources humaines comme alternative au système antagoniste de relations du travail qui prévalait dans les années de l'après-guerre. Ce paradigme ne semble toutefois pas aussi généralisé et aussi efficace que ne le croient ses promoteurs. Nous avons identifié six raisons pour lesquelles son efficacité est limitée: 1) juridiquement les travailleurs sont exclus de la conception, des résultats et des avantages de leur travail; 2) les employeurs cherchent à maximiser les profits en subordonnant à cet objectif les intérêts des salariés; 3) les relations de travail sont, d'un point de vue juridique, autocratiques par définition; 4) le contrat de travail est, de sa nature même, vague ou diffus; 5) la plupart des travailleurs occupent des postes subalternes; 6) une grande partie des tâches qu'ils effectuent sont généralement routinières et monotones. Réunis, ces facteurs soulèvent un problème de contrôle administratif, et même si des méthodes avant-gardistes sont de nature à favoriser la rectification de cet état de choses, elles ne peuvent en extirper les causes profondes. Ainsi, tout en reconnaissant qu'elles peuvent entraîner certains changements, ceux-ci sont naturellement limités.

De plus, nous estimons qu'il n'est que normal pour les employeurs de recourir à de telles méthodes uniquement dans la mesure où les avantages qu'ils en tirent (conflits moins fréquents, meilleurs rendements) dépassent les coûts (coûts des salaires et des programmes, etc.). Ceci dépend: 1) du pouvoir des salariés de quitter leur emploi, de faire la grève et de contrôler leurs conditions de travail; 2) des attitudes antérieures des employés; 3) des économies dans les coûts de gestion et 4) du prix à payer pour l'efficacité des méthodes avant-gardistes par rapport à des moyens plus 'directs' de contrôle. Résultat: ces méthodes de gestion sont davantage sujettes à être adoptées par les grandes entreprises qui possèdent des établissements considérables, utilisant une technologie complexe et à grande concentration de capital et fabricant des biens ou donnant des services essentiels ou non standards destinés à des marchés concentrés.

Enfin, nous avons recueilli un ensemble complet de données auprès de cent entreprises syndiquées canadiennes afin de connaître les 'effets' des méthodes dites d'avant-garde sur l'efficacité de l'organisation. Les résultats correspondent en

grande partie à nos attentes: a) les méthodes dites d'avant-garde ont tendance à produire des effets positifs, mais peu importants; b) ce sont surtout les grandes entreprises, possédant de vastes unités de production à forte concentration de capital, dotées de technologies de pointe et fonctionnant sur des marchés concentrés qui y recourent.

Le paradigme avant-gardisme en gestion des ressources humaines ne peut être associé à un modèle global en relations industrielles. En effet, il ne peut servir de substitut aux dispositions institutionnelles qui permettent et reconnaissent la légitimité du conflit. Il est plutôt nécessaire de renforcer les droits légaux des salariés et de leurs représentants, de telle sorte qu'ils puissent participer en toute égalité aux décisions traditionnellement dévolues aux employeurs.

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