Elton Mayo

7. The name of Professor Elton Mayo is most usually associated with what has come to be considered as the best known and most widely quoted piece of social research this century, namely the Hawthorne Studies, carried out at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company in Chicago, U.S.A., between 1927 and 1932. The emphasis in the Hawthorne Studies was on the worker rather than on the work. Unlike Taylor and the Scientific Managers, the researchers at Hawthorne were primarily concerned with studying people, especially in terms of their social relationships at work. Their conclusions were that Man is a social animal – at work as well as outside it – and that membership of a group is important to individuals. Group membership leads to establishment of informal groups within the official, formal, groupings as laid down in the organisation structure.

8. These conclusions gave rise to the idea of Social Man and to the importance of human relations. Elton Mayo has been described as the founder of the Human Relations movement, whose advocates stressed the need for managerial strategies to ensure that concern for people at work was given the highest priority. This movement, if it can be described as such, spanned the period from the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s, after which there was a gradual trend away from Social Man and his close relation Self-actualising Man towards the idea of Complex Man operating in a highly variable organisational environment.

9. Elton Mayo (1880–1949) was an Australian by birth, a psychologist by training, and, according to some, a natural PR man by inclination. At the time of the Hawthorne Studies he was Professor of Industrial Research at the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration. He was already involved in the study of issues such as fatigue, accidents and labour turnover, when he was approached by executives of the Western Electric Company for advice. The company, which prided itself on its welfare facilities, had begun a number of studies into the effects of lighting on production and morale. They had discovered, to their surprise, that the groups of workers who were the subject of study improved their productivity whether their lighting was improved or not. Clearly some factor other than the impact of physical improvements was at work. The company management decided to call in the experts.
10. Their decision was to bring considerable fame to Mayo, in particular. His popularisation of the results and conclusions to be drawn from the Hawthorne Studies\textsuperscript{3} made an enormous impact at the time. The idea of Social Man was seen as a rebuttal of the ideas of scientific management, with its emphasis on the task and the control of work. Subsequent decades have also been greatly influenced by the findings at Hawthorne, and most of the credit has gone to Mayo.

11. **The Hawthorne Studies.**

The studies were carried out over several years in a number of different stages as follows:

**First Stage** (1924–1927). This was conducted by the company’s own staff under the direction of Messrs. Pennock and Dickson. As mentioned above, this stage was concerned with the effects of lighting on output. Eventually two groups of comparable performance were isolated from the rest and located in separate parts of the plant. One group, the control group, had a consistent level of lighting; the other group, the experimental group, had its lighting varied. To the surprise of the researchers, the output of both groups increased. Even when the lighting for the experimental group was reduced to a very low level, they still produced more! At this point Pennock sought the help of Mayo and his Harvard colleagues.

12. **Stage Two** (1927–1929). This stage became known as the Relay Assembly Test Room. The objective was to make a closer and more detailed study of the effects of differing physical conditions on productivity. At this stage, it is important to note, there was no deliberate intention to analyse social relationships or employee attitudes. Six women workers in the relay assembly section were segregated from the rest in a room of their own. Over the course of the experiment, the effects of numerous changes in working conditions were observed. Rest pauses were introduced and varied, lunch times were varied in timing and in length. Most of the changes were discussed with the women before being implemented. Productivity increased whether the conditions were made better or worse. Later studies included altering the working week. Once again output increased regardless of the changes. By the end of Stage Two the researchers realized they had not just been studying the relationship between physical working conditions, fatigue, monotony and output, but had been entering into a study of employee attitudes and values. The women’s reactions to the changes, ie increased output regardless of whether conditions improved or worsened, has come to be known as ‘the Hawthorne Effect’. That is to say the women were responding not so much to the changes as to the fact that they were the centre of attention – a special group.

13. **Stage Three** (1928–1930). Before the Relay Assembly Test had come to an end, the company had decided to implement an interview programme designed to ascertain employee attitudes towards working conditions, their supervision and their jobs. The interviews were conducted by selected supervisors, initially on a half-hour, structured basis. Eventually the interview pattern became relatively unstructured and lasted for ninety minutes. Despite this, the numbers interviewed reached over 20,000 before the programme was suspended. The wealth of material gained was used to improve several aspects of working conditions and supervision. It also became clear from the responses that relationships with people were an important factor in the attitudes of employees.

14. **Stage Four** (1932). This was known as the Bank Wiring Observation Room. In this study fourteen men on bank wiring were removed to a separate observation room, where, apart from a few differences, their principal working conditions were the same as those
in the main wiring area. The aim was to observe a group working under more or less normal conditions over a period of six months or so. The group was soon developing its own rules and behaviour – it restricted production in accordance with its own norms; it short-circuited the company wage incentive scheme and in general protected its own sectional interests against those of the company. The supervisors concerned were powerless to prevent this situation. The group had clearly developed its own unofficial organisation, run in such a way that it was able to protect itself from outside influences whilst controlling its internal life too.

15. **Final Stage** (1936). This stage was commenced some four years after Stage Four because of the economic difficulties of the depression. This final stage was based on lessons learned from the earlier studies. Its focus was firmly on employee relations and took the form of Personnel Counselling. The counsellors encouraged employees to discuss their problems at work, and the results led to improvements in personal adjustments, employee–supervisor relations and employee–management relations.

16. The official account of the Hawthorne Studies was written not by Mayo, but by a Harvard colleague (Roethlisberger) and one of the company’s own researchers (Dickson). Their detailed descriptions of the research did not appear until 1939, sometime after Mayo had already put the spotlight on the studies in his popularised account work published six years earlier.

17. There have been many criticisms of the way the Hawthorne Studies have been interpreted. Mayo’s references to them were included in writings which propounded his theories about Man and industrial society. As a result, his use of the studies was biased towards his own interpretation of what was happening. For the official evidence one must look to Roethlisberger and Dickson. Modern researchers point out that their Hawthorne counterparts overlooked important factors in assessing their results. They also adopted some unreliable methods for testing the evidence in the first place. However, everyone is agreed that the Hawthorne Studies represented the first major attempt to undertake genuine social research. Important lessons were learned, and, perhaps even more importantly, many questions were raised by these studies.

**Conclusions**

18. The main conclusions to be drawn from the Hawthorne researches are:

- Individual workers cannot be treated in isolation, but must be seen as members of a group.
- The need to belong to a group and have status within it is more important than monetary incentives or good physical working conditions.
- Informal (or unofficial) groups at work exercise a strong influence over the behaviour of workers.
- Supervisors and managers need to be aware of these social needs and cater for them if workers are to collaborate with the official organisation rather than work against it.

19. The Hawthorne Experiment began as a study into physical conditions and productivity. It ended as a series of studies into social factors: membership of groups, relationships with supervisors etc. Its most significant findings showed that social relations at work were every bit as important as monetary incentives and good physical working conditions. They also demonstrated the powerful influence of groups in determining behaviour at work. By modern standards of social research, the Hawthorne Studies were relatively
unsophisticated in their approach. Nevertheless, they represented a major step forward for the social sciences in their study of work organisations. Also, by their model of Social Man, they did much to further the humanisation of work.

20. The concept of Social Man dominated the thinking of social researchers and practising managers alike in the wake of the Hawthorne Studies. The emphasis on the employee’s social or belonging needs, as opposed to the needs of the task, continued throughout the 1930s and 1940s until the mid-1950s. At this point in time we move into what has been described as the Social Psychological School. The writers referred to here may all be considered to belong to this school of thought. The emphasis is still on people as the most crucial factor in determining organisational effectiveness, but people who have considerably more than just physical and social needs. The dominant concept here is that of Self-actualising Man, and the influential contributors are the American social scientists Abraham Maslow, Douglas McGregor, Frederick Herzberg, Rensis Likert, Chris Argyris and D.C. McClelland.