

Mitchell's Musings 7-11-11: Nothing New?

Many readers know that LERA – the parent organization that hosts EPRN - maintains the LERA-Dialog emailing service on which various articles and opinions are posted and discussed.¹ A recent discussion involved the meaning of words. An old debate was resurrected on the use of phrases such as “human resources” and “human capital” to describe employees. I say old because a similar debate went on when the predecessor of LERA, the Industrial Relations Research Association, changed its name to the current Labor and Employment Relations Association. At the time, it might be noted, those folks attached to “industrial relations” failed to remark on the lack of descriptiveness of that term. Do industries have relations?

In any event, in the course of the email back-and-forth on LERA-Dialog about these issues, someone noted that nowadays employees are often referred to as “associates,” with whatever positive connotation that word is supposed to have. Partners in the enterprise? When I used to teach in whatever you want to call the field, students tended to think that calling workers associates was a recent innovation, maybe a practice created by Starbucks – a company that does just that. In fact, most employment practices that we identify as modern or recent have long histories. It isn't quite true that there is nothing new under the Sun. But it is true that ideas have a way of percolating and then becoming popular, perhaps with a new label or some repackaging.

Consider a firm which calls its workers “associates,” has company executives and workers eating in the same cafeteria, provides a massage parlor and physical therapy for employees (and, of course, insurance), and features management-by-walking-around. The firm's top executive talks about how the company can be competitive in global markets. You can see a two-part video about the firm at the links below:

Part 1 at <http://www.employmentpolicy.org/innovative-personnel-practices-during-ww2-part-one-linked-mitchells-musings-7-11-11>

Part 2 at <http://www.employmentpolicy.org/innovative-personnel-practices-during-ww2-part-two-linked-mitchells-musings-7-11-11>

The only thing that might be surprising is that the video was made in 1943, i.e., during World War II.

I would like to put a happy ending on this week's musing and tell you that these advanced human resource or industrial relations or employment (you pick the description) practices ensured a postwar success for the firm in the video. Sadly, however, it went out of business a few years after the War. There is undoubtedly a lesson from that outcome, too. But we can save that lesson for some future musing.

¹ Information on how to put yourself on the LERA-Dialog emailing list is available at <http://www.leraweb.org/participate/email-listservs>