

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

Null Effect

THE SOURCE: “Was There Really a Hawthorne Effect at the Hawthorne Plant? An Analysis of the Original Illumination Experiments” by Steven D. Levitt and John A. List, in *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, Jan. 2011.

IN 1924 THE NATIONAL RESEARCH Council ran a now famous experiment at Western Electric’s Hawthorne plant in Cicero, Illinois. The researchers asked a simple question: Does better lighting make workers more productive? They were surprised by what they found. Productivity improved regardless of whether the lights were low or high.

The unexpected results gave rise to one of the key insights of modern psychology, later named the Hawthorne effect: Researchers can change the behavior of their subjects merely by studying them. More broadly, the mere fact of paying

attention to people makes them more productive. The Hawthorne study helped usher in a whole field of research, called industrial psychology; influenced the shape of ideas about human relations and management; and shaped the fundamentals of experimental design.

Since the 1970s, scholars have returned to the data from follow-up experiments done at the Hawthorne plant and questioned the original findings, but the data from the initial studies, conducted in 1924 and 1925, were thought to have been lost. University of Chicago economists Steven D. Levitt and John A. List were able to locate them in the libraries of the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and Harvard Business School, and apply modern statistical techniques to the nearly century-old data. They find little support for the Hawthorne effect. A “naive” reading of the data does

show some evidence of the effect, but much of that correlation can be explained by other, previously unexamined factors.

Remarkably, for example, the researchers always came in to alter the lighting on Sundays, when the factory was closed. They then measured the effect on Monday. But the workers were always more productive on Mondays than on other days, even when not being studied. The original researchers seem to have mistaken the day-of-the-week effect for the Hawthorne effect, Levitt and List remark. They find some evidence that workers being studied became more productive over a long period of time, but nothing strong enough to justify any big claims.

The Hawthorne effect may have risen to prominence because it had behind it “the power of a good story.” But good stories do not good science make.

EXCERPT

End Times?

The word ‘developed’ contains an important assumption: that a historical process known as development (closely related to modernization—another problematic word) not only exists throughout the world, it culminates in a known end which has already been reached. This word implies that countries like France, Canada, and our own happy United States of America have reached the end of history, the summit of human achievement, stable and enduring arrangements in political economy that are unlikely to change much going forward.

Nothing could be stupider or less historically defensible than this belief, yet few assumptions are more widespread among the world’s intelligentsia, planners, and, especially, bureaucrats. Technological change has never been moving faster or with greater force than it is today, as the implications of one revolution in IT after another work themselves out; the foundations of the global economic and political order are being shaken by the dramatic rise of new powers. Yet somehow many of us believe that the Western world is an end state: the comfy couch at the end of history rather than the launching pad for another great, disruptive leap into the unknown.

—WALTER RUSSELL MEAD, professor of foreign affairs at Bard College, on his blog,

Via Meadia (Jan. 17, 2011)