

# The Changing Nature of Work

## 1924: Assembly Line Boosts Sales and Earnings

**I**N 1924 THE TYPICAL FACTORY WORKER WORKED ON AN ASSEMBLY LINE, REPEATING ONE SMALL TASK. SOCIOLOGISTS ROBERT AND HELEN LYND WROTE OF ONE SUCH WORKER: "The worker is drilling metal joint rings for the front of a well-known automobile. He stands all day in front of his multiple drill-press, undrilled rings being brought constantly to his elbow and his product carted away."

The man described above drilled a pair of joint rings three times each minute, over and over again. In a nine-hour day, he performed his job 1,620 times.

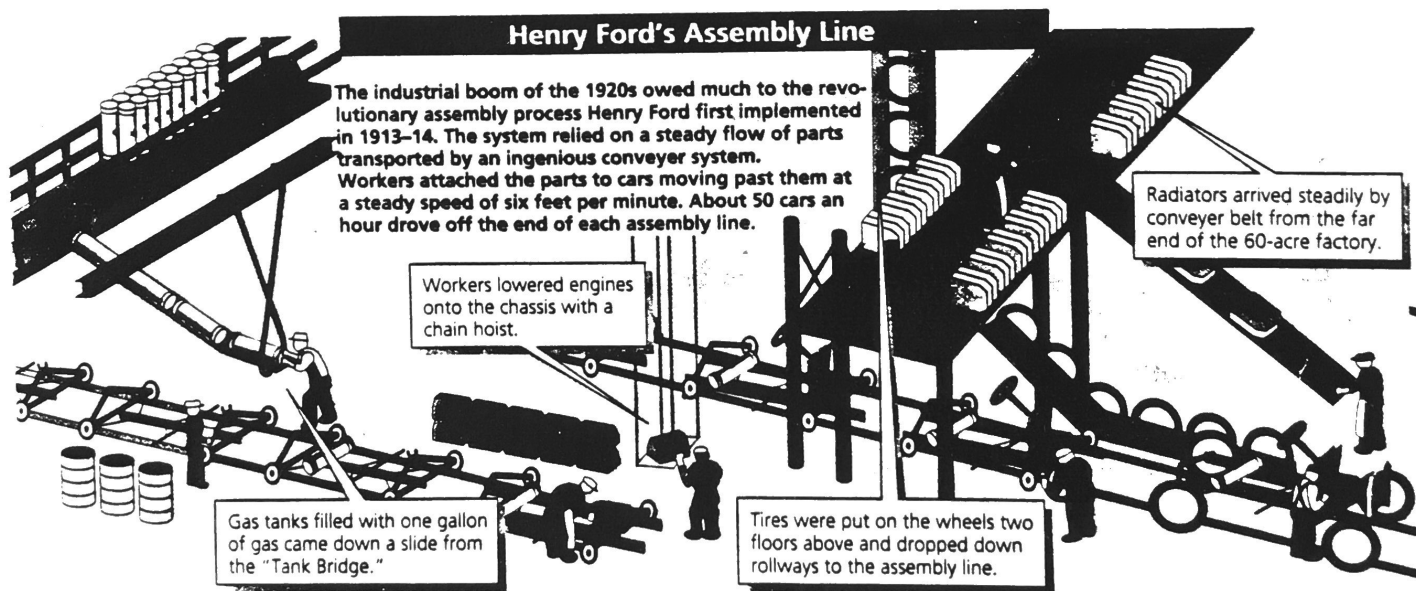
Although a worker's contribution to making an automobile usually involved tedious work, many factory laborers could still hop into their own cars and drive home at the end of the work day. In that sense, Henry Ford's dream of 1907 had come true. The assembly

line sped up car manufacturing and reduced the cost of producing automobiles. Ford passed that savings on to his customers by slashing the prices of his cars.

### *Henry Ford and the Assembly Line*

**H**enry Ford was one of the first industrialists to act on the realization that each worker is also a consumer. If workers had more money, Ford reasoned, they could purchase more of his cars. So in 1914 Ford took the revolutionary action of doubling the wages of the workers at his plant in Highland Park, Michigan.

**Working for Henry Ford** In an era when \$2 a day was considered a generous wage, Ford offered \$5



### STUDY GUIDE

#### As You Read

Analyze the changes in the workplace for factory and white collar workers, and examine the trend for women to enter offices in new jobs. Also, think about the following concept and skills.

#### Central Concept

- understanding how **scientific management** changed the lives of factory and office workers and revolutionized American production during the 1920s

#### Thinking Skills

- recognizing assumptions
- comparing and contrasting
- identifying cause and effect

a day to workers of "thrifty habits." Workers who refused to learn English, rejected the company detective's advice, gambled, drank, or pursued "any malicious practice derogatory to . . . moral behavior" did not get the raise. In two years, three-quarters of Ford's workers made \$5 a day.

Other industrialists called Ford a "traitor to his class" because his actions defied the conventional wisdom of keeping wages low and prices high. However, Ford reasoned that well-paid workers would be less likely to seek other jobs and more likely to do their boring jobs willingly. In 1926 Ford again delighted the workers and shocked the business world by reducing the work week at his plant from a 48-hour, six-day week to a 40-hour, five-day week.

Ford could easily afford to cut back his worker's hours and increase their pay beyond the standards of the time. The assembly line methods that permitted mass production made tremendous profits for Ford, whose company earned an estimated \$264,000 per day in 1922.

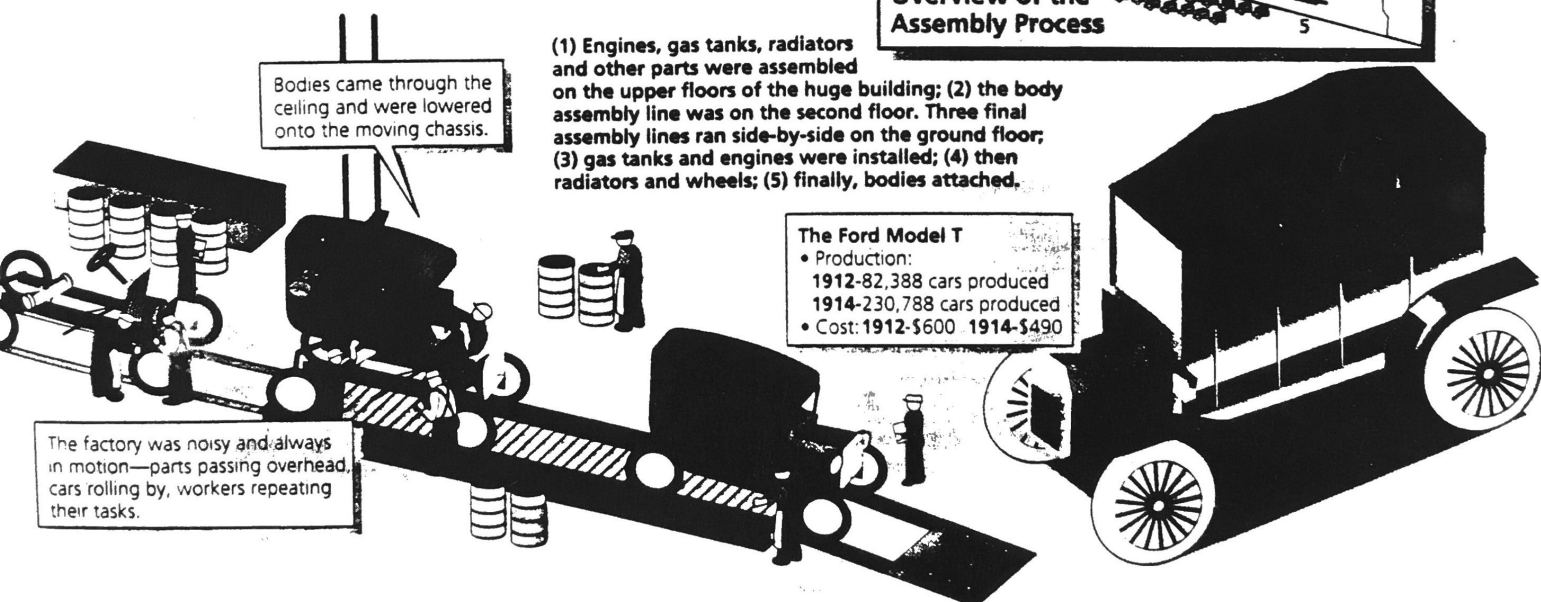
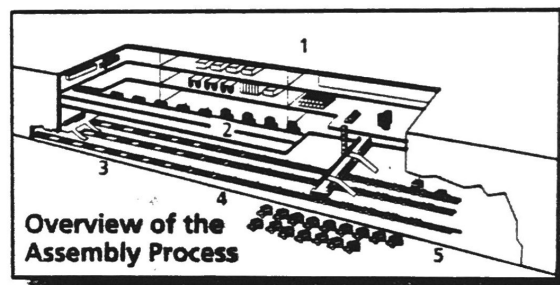
In addition to their increased wages, Ford's workers gained some other benefits from the new assembly line work. Because the jobs required no skills and little training, laborers could master their work quickly. In fact, almost anyone who wanted to work could do the new jobs.

Henry Ford employed ex-convicts, as well the physically and mentally handicapped. He believed a

worker to be "equally acceptable whether he has been in Sing Sing or at Harvard and we do not even inquire from which place he has graduated. All that he needs is the desire to work." Indeed, Henry Ford prided himself on hiring thousands of northern European immigrants and members of minority groups who might not otherwise have had good job opportunities.

**Man or Machine?** The Czech immigrants who worked for Henry Ford and in other factories brought a new word to the United States with them during the 1920s. The word *robot* came to mean a machine that acts like a person or a person who acts like a machine. In the new factories, it began to be difficult to tell where the worker ended and the machine began.

Typically, a mechanized assembly line delivered the material to workers at waist level, so they did not have to waste valuable time in walking, stooping, reaching, or bending. Each worker, doing a tiny part of the total job, worked at a pace set by the machine.



## STUDY GUIDE

### Recognizing Assumptions

Many people praised Henry Ford's generosity in raising his workers' wages, citing his idealism and his "faith in human nature." But Ford knew that mass production could yield high profits

only if plenty of workers could afford to buy the goods they produced. "Profits," Ford said, "belong primarily to the business and the workers are only part of the business."

- 1 How could workers in Ford's Highland Park plant qualify for the \$5 daily wage?