The Bangladesh Times

Computer dehumanising the workshop

NEW YORK : Computers are turning white-collar offices into old-fashioned sweat shops with a sinister modern twist : managers can now easily adapt technology to spy on their workers.

So argues writer-playwright Barbara Garson in a new book that says computers are dehumanising the workplace and transforming stockbrokers, military officers, social workers and other professionals into clerks.

"The same principles that transformed craftsmen into factory hands are now being applied to made white-collar workers cheaper to train, easier to replace, less skilled, less expensive and less special" Garson writes.

White-collar workers, she argues, are the latest victims of a trend toward workplace electronic surveillance that has already hit clerks, switchboard operators, secretaries, bank tellers and service workers.

The goal of modern management, she told Reuters in a recent interview, is to centralise contorl by using computer programmes to dictate exactly how a worker does his job.

Her new book, "The Electronic Sweatshop : How Computers Are Transforming The Office Of The Future Into The Factory Of The Past," follows her popular 1970s "All The Livelong Day," about the tedium of factory assembly lines.

Management's impulse, Garson said, has always been to control.

"What's new, is that electronic monitoring is cheap, and it's easy to compile and correlate data on a given worker. In the old days or in blue-collar jobs, you'd almost have to have one supervisor per worker to so carefully monitor a worker's performance."

Now computer can count coffee breaks, telephone calls and even keystrokes, thus making some workers accountable for every second of the working day and slaves to numerical ratings.

"With computers counting only numerical things, there's a shift toward thinking that that's what counts," Garson said.

In some professions, computers have taken over much of the job. Many financial planners, for instance, depend on computer programmes to advise their clients, she said. They simply hand out questionaires and feed the responses into a computer, which churns out a financial plan.

Garson cites a 1985 U.S. Department of Labour study stating that two-thirds of all American workers who use video terminals—an estimated seven million people — are under second by second electronic surveillance by their managers.

A computer not only tells fast food restaurant employers when to take the chips out of the fry vat but also influences military decisions.

Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral thomas Moorer, one of the dozens of people Garson interviewed in her research, explained how computerised inventory control brought to light the U.S. bombing of Cambodia in 1969, which had been kept secret from Congress.

She quoted Moorer, Chief of Naval Operations during the Vietnam war, as saying "our computers supplied information which led into diverse questions before Congress."

He added : "The art of computerising the decision-making process wasn't developed when the Vietnam war ended. No, they weren't trying to run the whole war with a computer then. But don't kid yourself They'll try today to do it."

Garson concluded that automation can sometimes pay off in terms of efficiency and productivity, but that it is often degrading and intrusive, she stressed difference between labour-controlling and labour-saving machines.

"If it (a job) can really be done by a machine, like bank teller machines, then let it really be done by a machine," she said. "It's just when you try to turn the person into a machine that I object to."

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