

Then: Workplace Change and Agility

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about how work changed during the last half of American history. How workers organized changed; where workers worked changed; the workers themselves changed. In general, those who had the most to gain from change were willing to change the most. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Workplace Change and Agility
2. Geographic Agility
3. Social and Economic Agility



BEFORE YOU START

How did agility help people respond to the changes of the Industrial Age?

1. Workplace Change and Agility

A change as significant as the Industrial Revolution required **agility** from people as they encountered the new social structures, technologies, and realities of an industrialized economy. Problem solving was urgently needed to overcome the worker exploitation that accompanied the move toward factory labor. By the late 1800s, rapid expansion of manufacturing and the race to increase profits endangered the lives and health of millions of workers. Not only that, but a lack of safety regulations in industries like meatpacking created the potential for unsafe products that endangered consumers.

In response to these issues, workers formed labor unions to fight for their rights. Union members used tactics like staging **strikes** to try to secure higher wages and better working conditions. They were challenged by industrialists like Henry Ford, who actively opposed union membership among his employees, or Henry Clay Frick, who hired armed guards to violently break up a steelworkers' strike in Homestead, Pennsylvania, in the 1890s. After decades of struggle, the National Labor Relations Act was passed in 1935, ensuring that employers could not legally interfere with labor unions (National Labor Relations Board, n.d.).



TERM TO KNOW

Strikes

Work stoppages organized by a group as a form of protest or in order to win points in negotiations.

2. Geographic Agility

How did people cope with the changes brought by the Industrial Revolution and the factory age? Often, they simply moved. As demand for workers in central industrial areas grew, many left farms for manufacturing jobs in cities or growing factory towns. Those who were able to move, find new work, and adapt to living in new places had the chance to raise their standard of living. In the process, they had to learn new skills, often on the job.

One large-scale movement of people during the U.S. Industrial Revolution was the Great Migration. In the early 20th century, millions of African Americans moved from the Jim Crow South to cities and manufacturing centers in the Northeast and Midwest. The availability of economic opportunity and more accessible railroad transportation offered them an escape from racism and systemic disadvantage.

3. Social and Economic Agility

Madam C.J. Walker (1867–1919) is an example of someone who, through vision and agility, harnessed the changing nature of life during the Industrial Revolution. She was a self-made millionaire at a time when African American women were severely limited in career opportunities by racist and sexist economic structures.



Portrait of Madam C.J. Walker (1867-1919)

Born as Sarah Breedlove to formerly enslaved parents in Louisiana, she married at a young age, was widowed with a small child, and then found work as a laundress in St. Louis, Missouri. At the age of 38, she created what would become a hugely successful line of hair care products and cosmetics for black women (Hobson, 2017).

Sarah Breedlove used agility to reinvent herself as Madam C.J. Walker. Her empire eventually included not

only hair care products and cosmetics, but also beauty schools and new technologies such as hot combs. Cultural historians today have noted that in addition to being successful, Walker's marketing strategies were a way of breaking down barriers. She advertised directly to African American women rather than upholding whiteness as the standard of beauty (Hobson, 2017). In doing so, she became wealthy and famous, showing social as well as economic agility.

4. Educational Agility

Although public schooling in the United States existed since colonial times, public schools weren't always universally available to all students and the requirements haven't always been the same. There were a great number of school reforms that started taking place in the early 1900s including more inclusive schools and schools that started teaching a more general education.

Over the years and in different places at different times, schools started requiring students to attend longer as they got older. After World War II, the passage of the **G.I. Bill** helped millions of veterans attend colleges and universities. The idea of a college education started to become more common for all and more necessary for economic success and security.



TERM TO KNOW

G.I. Bill

The federal legislation that, among other things, enabled millions of WWII veterans to attend college for the first time.

Now that we've touched on a few examples of how people in the past used agility to face a changing world and a changing workplace, it's time to take stock of what we've learned so far—and to look to the future.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned how different groups of people used agility to succeed in the face of the changes associated with the industrialized economy. For example, industrialization developed alongside significant health and safety threats to consumers and workers alike. Industrial workers therefore had to find ways to advance **workplace change and agility** for the benefit of all, such as forming unions and striking for change. Others demonstrated **geographic agility** by simply moving from one place to another in search of more opportunity, as in the example of the Great Migration. Although she preceded the Great Migration, Madam C.J. Walker exemplified **social and economic agility** by taking advantage of the industrial economy to become a self-made millionaire. Finally, the importance of **educational agility** increased, as high school and college degrees became more necessary to secure employment over the course of the 20th century.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Strategic Education, Inc. 2020. Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future.

REFERENCES

1935 Passage of the Wagner Act (n.d.). National Labor Relations Board. www.nlrb.gov/about-nlrb/who-we-are/our-history/1935-passage-of-the-wagner-act

Hobson, Janell. (2017, October 20). The Subversive Praxis of Black Beauty and Wealth. *Black Perspectives*. www.aaihs.org/the-subversive-praxis-of-black-beauty-and-wealth



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Portrait of Madam C.J. Walker \(1867-1919\)](#) | Author: Michael Ochs Archives / Getty Images | License: Rights-managed



TERMS TO KNOW

G.I. Bill

The federal legislation that, among other things, enabled millions of WWII veterans to attend college for the first time.

Strikes

Work stoppages organized by a group as a form of protest or in order to win points in negotiations.