All workplaces in capitalist firms are similar in that work effort is elicited from workers with a combination of coercion and consent. It is true, however, that some workplaces depend more on coercion while others depend more on consent.

Workplaces also differ in other dimensions: the main agent of work extraction used within the firm. Three different types of workplaces have been identified: those relying primarily on simple control, those relying primarily on technical control, and those relying primarily on bureaucratic control.

**SIMPLE CONTROL**

Simple control is a technique for managing labor within a firm. It has three key attributes:

- Employers and supervisors directly supervise workers.
- Employers and supervisors motivate workers by using rewards, threats, and, perhaps, charisma. Employers and supervisors have *great freedom in determining what mix of rewards and threats to use*.
- The *personal connection* between employer and employee is central.

Simple control is frequently found in small firms in which the owner of the firm is in complete control of the firm and is generally at the workplace personally directing production. Simple control is also historically important because it was the dominant way that labor was directed in the early years of capitalism in the United States during the second part of the 19th century.

Simple control puts much pressure on the employer. In a highly competitive market it is the employer's success in eliciting work effort from employees that
often determines whether the firm will be successful. Small businesses that do succeed are often run by charismatic employers who, through the force of their own personalities, make employees look up to them and provide a high level of work effort. Often, the employer constructs within the workplace a set of personal relationships with his employees that lead these employees to voluntarily provide a high level of work effort.

Such firms rely largely on the generation of consent. The employer in these firms, however, generally reserves for himself complete and unhindered decision-making power over who is rewarded and who is punished within the firm and what rewards and punishments are used. In such firms workers tend to see themselves as individuals with connection (good or bad) with employer. It is all at a person and individualized level.

Simple control works best in very small firms. Once firms start to grow and the number of employees increases, simple control based on the direct role of the employer becomes impossible. There are just too many employees to oversee.

Larger firms start to hire supervisors to play the role previously played by the employer. These firms often develop a simple pyramidal scheme of supervision in which the owner directly supervises top management, top management directly supervises a layer of second level supervisors, and this second layer of supervisors might supervise a still lower level of supervisors. At the bottom of the pyramid are the line employees who actually do the work. In each case, those above use their charisma and a set of rewards and punishments to directly supervise those below them.

Such hierarchical schemes are difficult to make work over long periods. The motivation of employees (and of lower level supervisors) still depends on the skills of supervisors. Yet is it hard to find a large number of supervisors who can successfully motivate those below them. Often less than competent supervisors in a hierarchical system alienate those below them. Secondly, as an organization grows large, the employer increasingly must question the loyalty of the majority of those doing the supervisors. While the employer might want decisions to be made on the basis of what is best for the profits of the firm, lower level supervisors might have a different agenda. Perhaps they simply want to wield power. Perhaps they are more interested in being friends with employees rather than a supervisor in a business situation. Perhaps lower level supervisors actively work against the firm by, say, stealing output and money from the firm. Often these lower level supervisors are seen by workers to be
arbitrary and unfair. The resulting large, hierarchical firm often becomes more impersonal and filled with conflicts between direct producers and supervisors.

**TECHNICAL CONTROL**

Technical control was developed as a response to the failure of simple control to work well in large firms. Technical control reduces the importance of supervisors for motivating employees and for direction production.

Technical control involves, in part, designing machinery and planning the flow of work in order to force a certain pace of work on workers. In this way workers lost much control over the pace of work. Indeed, frequently workers were tied to a workstation in this type of control and could no longer move around the factory on their own. This facilitated the oversight of production because a work away from his/her workstation was obviously not working properly.

A classic case of technical control is the “assembly line.” But technical control need not involve assembly lines. It can also take place in an office where paper moves from workers to work in a planned fashion so that workers are forced to process a certain amount of paper in a certain time.

Technical control permits the firm to reduce, or eliminate, the importance of close supervision by supervisors. Notably, the workflow was *not* determined by supervisors’ success in getting workers to work hard. Rather, the flow of work enforced on workers a certain pace.

By reducing the importance of supervisors, technical control helped reduce the conflicts between employers and supervisors. It also reduced the pressure on firms to find highly skilled supervisors. Because technical control now determined the pace of work, firms were able to get a high level of work effort even from employees who previously were supervised by incompetent or corrupt supervisors.

Technical control, however, creates a number of conditions that causes problems for management. For instance, workers see work extraction as being directly related to an impersonal firm and higher-level managers rather than personal interactions with immediate supervisors. The impersonal nature of the firm and the relentless pace of work tended to lead to “alienation” of workers. Workers also tended to be “homogenized”: they were all subjected to same plant-wide technical control. Such workers were more likely to come to see that they all had common interests. Before, different groups of workers were subjected to different conditions based on supervisor/foreman and most
workers believed that they had a unique individualized relationship with supervisors that might have little in common with most other workers in the firm.

As a consequence of this workers often saw themselves as having a common interest opposed to management. Personal relationships between employees and supervisors were not able to smooth over the feeling that workers had that machines were driving them. Additionally, workers came to recognize that behind the rapid pace of the machines were “the bosses” who had little in common with those working on the line.

Further, technical control sometimes made it easy for workers to disrupt production and to so do anonymously. As a result, workers often held veto power over unpopular management decisions.

Firms using technical control often found unions organizing most workers in the firm. If a union appeared, firms were often confronted with increased plant-wide strikes that shifted the balance of power to employees.

From the point of view of firms, technical control has both advantages and disadvantages. Many of the disadvantages of technical control are based on the impersonal nature of the employment relationship and on the fact that consent plays little role in the extraction of work effort. Rather, the pace of the assembly line and the threat of punishments (coercion) played the dominant role in getting workers to work at a pace deemed appropriate by management.

**BUREAUCRATIC CONTROL**

Bureaucratic control was a different system of labor control that developed after World War II. Bureaucratic control appeared largely in response to the failure of technical control to manage large firms successfully without generating a high level of conflict with in the firm and the development of unions within the workplace.

Bureaucratic control involves a set of explicit rules governing the workplace rather than unconstrained supervisors or an assembly line. According to Richard Edwards, “The definition and direction of work tasks, the evaluation of worker performances, and the distribution of rewards and the imposition of punishments all came to depend upon established rules and procedures, elaborately and systematically laid out.”

In bureaucratic control workers are put into clearly defined jobs. This job often has an explicit “job descriptions,” a written indication of what is expected of worker. Unlike in simple control and technical control, the
expectations of a given worker are not based simply on the supervisor. In bureaucratic control, further, work is often performed according to rules and procedures explicitly detailed in handbooks.

In bureaucratic control workers are to be judged according to how well they perform the work required in their job. If, say, a worker’s job description indicates that a worker is supposed to correctly adjust the tension of belts connecting two parts of an automobile engine, then the worker is supposed to be rewarded or punished according to how well they do adjust the tension. They are not supposed to be rewarded based upon whether they laugh at a supervisor’s jokes.

Bureaucratic control often involves “job ladders” and a “long-term employment relationship.” Job ladders exist when over time workers move up to more difficult and better paying jobs and existing employees within the firm fill most of the higher level job openings that appear within the firm. A long-term employment relationship exists when both the employer and the employee expect that the employee will be with the firm for a long time. They also both agree that the employee will not be dismissed for bad reasons and that the employer will strive to find ways to reduce the need to layoff or eliminate workers.

In bureaucratic control workers are evaluated according to what is in the job description and not simply on the whims of supervisors. Supervisors were themselves subjected to bureaucratic control: they were directed and supervised in how to evaluate their subordinates by job descriptions for their own jobs.

Reprimand, suspension, dismissal, and other punishments became fixed penalties for specified categories of offenses. Explicit rules govern what done in certain situations. These rules existed either in an employee handbook or in a union contract.

Often part of bureaucratic controls is the existence of a grievance procedure. Such a procedure permits employees to appeal the decisions of their direct supervisors to some upper-level manager.

Positive incentives, rather than punishments, because the centerpiece of employee motivation. Proper behavior was rewarded rather than bad behavior being punished. Often the rewards give were raises and promotions.

Bureaucratic control institutionalized the exercise of capitalist power. Power now appeared to emanate from the formal organization rather than from a “capitalist” or an unchecked supervisor. People and their personal motivations were seemingly removed from the process of labor control. Yet the impact of
bureaucratic control was to generate an environment in which workers often voluntarily provided a high level of worker effort and, so, it fulfilled the agenda of the owners of the firm. This was because the bureaucratic control system had many similarities to an impersonal legal system. Many employees working within bureaucratic control see the firm to be a legitimate entity and deserving of loyalty and a high level of work effort.

**FIRMS USING MIXES OF DIFFERENT SYSTEMS OF LABOR CONTROL**

In the real world, firms often use combinations of different systems of labor control. For instance, large manufacturing firms often use a combination of technical control (via an assembly line) and bureaucratic control (rules specifying the interaction between workers and management). Other firms combine simple control (direct unfettered power of supervisors) with technical control.

In general, though, simple control and bureaucratic control cannot be found operating at the same time for some group of workers. But within some firms, one group of workers might be subjected to simple control while others groups of workers in the same firm might be subjected to bureaucratic control.