

The human factors of complex systems: a personal view

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Introduction

Exactly 50 years ago I finished my first year as an undergraduate psychology student at Oxford, and the following year the Human Factors Society (now the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society) was founded. Furthermore I recently (Moray, 2005) reviewed ergonomics work over more than a century, and I would like to consider some of the changes that have occurred in that period. I will present a very personal view: I am well aware that there will be exceptions to what I say were I to consider the history of ergonomics in many European, Japanese and other foreign countries. I shall throughout assume that “ergonomics” means the same as “human factors”.

It is a particular pleasure to give this, my final talk on human factors, in Sheffield where such a significant part of my professional career took place under the guidance of the late Harry Kay, who was my first psychology tutor at Oxford, and a head of department here in Sheffield who always maintained a firm belief in the importance of psychological research being applicable even if not always applied.

The history of Ergonomics

Table 1 is a summary of the history of our discipline. It is modified from an outstanding review of the history of ergonomics by Zionchenko & Munipov (1989) which is far more thorough than any British or American histories.

In the 1950s the desire to make psychology a science was intense, although with the Applied Psychology Research Unit at Cambridge and several European groups doing ergonomics and applied psychology, I am puzzled that as students we did not hear more about ergonomics and human factors. It is amazing to realise that in 1956 the Human Factors Society had not been founded, and the first volume of Ergonomics had not yet appeared. In those days academic experimental psychology distanced itself both from applied psychology and from “soft” psychology, (clinical, personality, even to some extent social) in pursuit of a scientific status reflecting that of the physical and biological sciences.

In D. de Waard, G.R.J. Hockey, P. Nickel, and K.A. Brookhuis (Eds.) (2007), *Human Factors Issues in Complex System Performance* (pp. 11 - 40). Maastricht, the Netherlands: Shaker Publishing.