

Workplace innovations in Korea – two distinctive cases of innovation

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Work organization, especially lean production and its transferability to foreign soils were a hot issue in the 1980s and early half of the 1990s but the debate on it seems to be much less now. Workplace innovations have been one of the urgent tasks for Korea to reposition its status in world markets. Unlike in Japan, industrial relations at the firm level has been a major obstacle to work reorganization in Korea.

Manufacturing firms in Korea have experimented workplace innovations in different ways, depending upon types of products, management strategies, inter-firm relations and industrial relations at their firms. Two types of workplace innovations are identified in Korea as being distinctive and showing continuously high performance. The first type of innovations is the successful transfer and localization of Japanese lean production into Korean soils exemplified by LG Electronics Ltd. The second type of innovations is relying on the rather opposite of lean production principles, to mean deliberately sparing some time for educating and training workers by changing shift patterns and making workers knowledgeable, multi-functional, and work more efficiently and responsibly. Based on case studies, we compare the two types of innovation in their commonalities and differences and reasons behind them.