

A REVIEW OF PIECEWORK

The HCI community has used the term “piecework” to describe myriad instantiations of on-demand labor, but this reference has generally been offered in passing. As this paper principally traces a relationship between the historical piecework and the contemporary crowdwork (or on-demand labor more generally), this casual familiarity with piecework may prove insufficient. We’ll more carefully discuss piecework in this section in order to inform the subsequent sections — and indeed, the entire argument. Specifically, we will 1) define “piecework” as researchers in the topic understood it; 2) trace the rise of piecework at a very high level, identifying key figures and ideas during this time; and finally 3) look at the fall of piecework, such as it was, considering in particular the factors that may have led to piecework’s eventual demise.

While “piecework” has proven difficult to concretize from the literature, we can trace a constellation of characteristics of piece work that recur throughout the literature. We’ll follow the history of research, collecting descriptions, examples, and provided definitions of piecework, trying to trace the outline of a working understanding of *what piecework is*.

One of the earliest definitions of piecework, in 1847, also proves to be the most circumspect in its wording. Raynbird offers what appears to be one of the first concise definitions of piecework, which he variously also calls “measure work”, “grate work”, and “task work”: “...the chief difference lies between the day-labourer, who receives a certain sum of money... for his day’s work, and the task-labourer, whose earnings depend on the *quantity* of work done [emphasis added]” [2].

Raynbird makes several arguments for the merits of piece work, pointing out that... “piece work holds out to the labourer an increase of wages as a reward for his skill and exertion... he knows that all depends on his own diligence and perseverance... [and] so long as he performs his work to the satisfaction of his master, he is not under that control to which the day-labourer is always subject.”

Chadwick gives a more concise definition of piecework — “payments for results” — and further illustrates the concept with examples: “... payment is made for each hectare which is pronounced to be well ploughed... for each living foal got from a mare; ... for each living calf got ...” etc...[1].

[al2: todo:

1. piecework section
2. what is it
3. historical arc
4. why do i care? how is it relevant

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References

- [1] Edwin Chadwick. “Opening Address of the President of the Department of Economy and Trade, at the Meeting of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, held at York, in September, 1864”. In: *Journal*

of the Statistical Society of London 28.1 (1865), pp. 1–33. ISSN: 09595341. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2338394>.

- [2] Hugh Raynbird. *Essay on Measure Work, locally known as task, piece, job, or grate work (in its application to agricultural labour)*. 1847.