

PIECE-WORK SYSTEM IN METER READING*

By J. A. A. BEAUDIN

Of Montreal Light, Heat & Power Consolidated

THE supply of public utilities involves the performance of numerous routine operations in the consumer's home by various categories of employees operating individually and without supervision.

The reading of meters in situ, the delivery of bills and collection notices, and the collection of arrears are a few of these operations.

Until recent years, and even nowadays, the general practice has been to remunerate employees engaged in these various tasks on a flat or fixed rate salary, based either on the hour, day, week or month, with additional privileges (in many cases) respecting sickness, holidays, etc.

Salaried Worker Leaves No Residue

This mode of remuneration makes possible the payment of wages for labor which has been only partially supplied, and since the actual supervision of his work is impracticable, the employee is tempted to take advantage of this condition occasionally, if not regularly, to limit his activities, and the means he may use to conceal his shortcomings are only limited by his ingenuity and his morality.

Furthermore, an employee working under this system of remuneration is inclined to complete indiscriminately each task as he encounters it, without any regard whatever to the amount of time and expense involved—i.e., he will often devote an unwarranted amount of time to straightening out a difficulty which if reported to the office could be handled much more expeditiously and economically by an expert. In other words, a worker on a fixed salary does not by-pass difficulties—he leaves no residue.

Piece-Worker Leaves a Residue

This state of affairs has led our company to devise and introduce a system of payment on a piece or commission basis as applicable to the various categories of these employees. This piece-work or commission system keeps the employee at his work, insures the full employment of his time, limits his absences from duty, prevents the payment of unearned wages, and regularizes the output—it helps get the work done regularly and systematically, but it leaves a residue.

The piece or commission worker is interested in handling a maximum of cases in a minimum of time, so naturally the tendency is to handle the straight-going jobs and by-pass difficulties whenever encountered, no matter what the employer's interest; the employee's interest is in the opposite direction, as every stop he makes to overcome difficulties limits his wages, hence while this system has removed the necessity for outdoor supervision, it has created a demand for closer indoor supervision over the work performed, and the piece-work system must be supplemented by a faithful follow-up system of by-passed jobs, without which it would prove a failure and cease to be economical and practical.

Workers Exchange Districts

The piece-work system only works advantageously in districts where the clientele is dense or semi-dense; it is not effective in districts where the clientele is scattered. The piece-worker is entitled to a supply of work commensurate with his capacity, and his work requires to be properly sorted and routed so that he may carry it on under advantageous conditions. The employer's interest also demands this in order to keep the piece-work rating at a minimum and at the same time afford the employee an opportunity of earning a fair remuneration thereunder. Failure to give proper attention to this detail would result in the establishment of a higher piece-work rating than would otherwise be necessary.

Employees of the same category should all be on an equal footing and be given equal opportunities. They should permute periodically from one district to another in order that one and all may cover each district and the entire system in a given period. All districts do not afford similar or equal opportunities and no one should be allowed to work continuously in either a good, poor or medium district, but all should have their turn in each.

Activities Cannot be Limited

The piece-worker, although not a tracer, a trouble straightener or a worker fitted to operate in scattered districts, must be efficient and capable of discharging his duties in a competent manner and carrying to a satisfactory conclusion all work entrusted to his care. While he is quite within his rights in by-passing real difficulties and not spending his time in conducting long searches, etc., he must positively not be allowed to by-pass for trifling causes any of the work entrusted to him.

It is not desirable to limit the activities of a piece-worker with a view to securing work of a higher standard, as he cannot fairly be retained in service without sufficient work to keep him employed, and even if allowed to go off duty as soon as he has performed his limited task, he will work just as hastily in order to get through and go off duty, and the employer's very object—viz., to cause him to move more slowly and perform work of a better quality, will be defeated; furthermore, the resultant limitation of his earning power is likely to cause the piece-work rating to go up. An energetic piece-worker with a large working capacity will earn "record" wages when supplied with unlimited work and will indirectly contribute to the maintenance of an economical and moderate piece-work rating. Furthermore, the employee who earns large wages will have every inclination to perform his work in accordance with instructions—his very interest in his position is the best guarantee to be wished for in this connection. A proper inside supervision over the work involved in the completion of by-passed jobs, as reported by the piece-worker from time to time, affords the employer a still further protection. This inside supervision is a most important feature of the piece-work system and must be exercised with constant vigilance.

Having now dealt with the economic aspects of the piece-work system, it may be of interest to outline briefly its operation in our company, especially as applied to our meter readers.

Saturday Devoted to "Pick-Ups"

We supply "dual service" (gas and electricity) and issue part of our bills on a bi-monthly basis and part on a monthly basis. The ordinary gas and electric lighting consumers are billed bi-monthly, while the larger consumers and all electric power users are billed monthly. Our territory is divided into meter reading districts and the work distributed in accordance with schedules, so that the readings repeat themselves on about an even calendar date in each district. Twenty-two men take care of our meter reading on a piece rating per meter. These men work five days per week on regular readings; every Saturday morning is devoted to each man "picking-up" the readings which he has by-passed for various reasons during the current week. This "picking-up" work is done at the regular rating for current readings. After the completion of this "picking-up," the residue of by-passed readings reported to the office represents only such cases as present unusual obstacles. The fact that each meter reader must appropriate a certain amount of time to "picking-up" his own by-passed readings is an added protection against by-passing for trifling causes. When reading meters in a district where the clientele is scattered, the meter readers are paid an additional flat rate sum per district; this rate varies from 50c. to \$2.00 per meter book. A somewhat similar system is in vogue in connection with power and special clients billed monthly, as such customers are limited in number and distributed all over the system. In addition to the regular staff two special meter readers are also employed on a combined fixed salary and piece-work basis to take care of readings by-passed by the regular readers.

*Excerpt from paper read at the last annual meeting of the Canadian Gas Association.