

The German Mechanical Engineering Industry and the NIFA-Panel¹

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1. An overview of the project

On January 1, 1989 a large-scale interdisciplinary research project funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) involving engineers and social scientists from a variety of subfields like economics, sociology, political science and psychology began. This date was also the birthday of the NIFA-Panel. The overarching goal which brought together an interdisciplinary group of scientists based at the Ruhr-University in Bochum was to study the potentials of semi-autonomous flexible production systems to make firms and companies of the German mechanical engineering industry more competitive. The specific task of the panel study was to collect data on firm level with respect to the options and restrictions involved in implementing these modern production systems. In addition, the panel was asked to monitor the diffusion process of computer-based production technologies, concepts of work and firm organization like teamwork and other components of the “lean production philosophy” in the industry. Table 1 presents an overview of the major themes the panel has covered.

Table 1

The NIFA Panel 1989 – 1999

Central Topics

- Production Technology
- Work Organization and Team Work
- Firm Organization
- Corporation among Companies

¹ NIFA is an acronym based on the title of the research project funded by the DFG: „Neue Informationstechnologien und Flexible Arbeitssysteme“ (New Information Technologies and Flexible Work Systems).