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Efficiency

Drive-Throughs and Finger Foods



Of the four dimensions of McDonaldization, efficiency is the one perhaps most often linked to the seeming increase in the pace of life. Increasing efficiency is behind just-in-time production, faster service, streamlined operations, and tight schedules everywhere, from the workplace to Disney World to the home.

Efficiency is generally a good thing. It is clearly advantageous to consumers, who can obtain what they need more quickly with less effort. Similarly, efficient workers can perform their tasks more rapidly and easily. Managers and owners gain because more work gets done, more customers are served, and greater profits are earned. But as is the case with rationalization in general, and each of its dimensions, irrationalities such as surprising inefficiencies and the dehumanization of workers and customers emerge from the drive for increased efficiency.

Efficiency means choosing the optimum means to a given end. However, the truly optimum means to an end is rarely found. People and organizations rarely maximize because they are hampered by such things as the constraints of history, financial circumstances, and organizational realities and by the limitations of human nature.¹ Nevertheless, organizations continue to strive for maximization in the hope that they will at least increase their efficiency.

In a McDonaldized society, people rarely search for the best means to an end on their own; rather, they rely on previously discovered and institutionalized means. Thus, when people start a new job, they are not expected to figure out for themselves how to do the work most efficiently. Instead, they undergo training designed to teach them what has been discovered over time to be the most efficient way of doing the work. Once on the job, people may discover little tricks that help them perform the task more efficiently, and these days, they are encouraged to pass this information on to management so that all workers performing that task can perform a bit more efficiently. In this way, over time, efficiency (and productivity) gradually increases. In fact, much of the economic boom in the late 20th and early 21st centuries was attributed to dramatic increases in efficiency and productivity that permitted growth with little inflation. The basis of the resurgence in the economy exists, at least in part, in those gains in efficiency and productivity.

Although the fast-food restaurant certainly did not create the yearning for efficiency, it has helped turn efficiency into an increasingly universal reality. Many sectors of society have had to change to operate in the efficient manner demanded by those accustomed to life in the drive-through lane of the fast-food restaurant. While many manifestations of efficiency can be traced directly to the influence of the fast-food restaurant, many more of them predate and helped shape the fast-food restaurant. Nonetheless, they all play a part in the preoccupation with efficiency fueled by McDonaldization.

STREAMLINING THE PROCESS

Above all else, Ray Kroc was impressed by the efficiency of the McDonald brothers' operation, as well as the enormous profit potential of such a system applied at a large number of restaurant sites. Here is how Kroc described his initial reactions to the McDonald's system:

I was fascinated by the simplicity and effectiveness of the system. . . . Each step in producing the limited menu was stripped down to its essence and accomplished with a minimum of effort. They sold hamburgers and cheeseburgers only. The burgers were . . . all fried the same way.²

But Kroc's obsession with streamlined processes predated his discovery of McDonald's. When he was selling blenders to restaurants, he was disturbed by the restaurants' lack of efficiency: "There was inefficiency, waste, and temperamental cooks, sloppy service and food whose [*sic*] quality was never consistent. What was needed was a simple product that moved from start to completion in a *streamlined* path [*italics added*]."³

Kroc toyed with other alternatives for streamlining the restaurant meal before settling on the McDonald's hamburger as a model of efficiency:

He had contemplated hot dogs, then rejected the idea. There were too many kinds of hot dogs—hot dogs with cereal and flour, the all-meat hot dog which is all kinds of meat, the all-beef hot dog, the kosher hot dog. And along with the different varieties, there were all sorts of different ways of cooking hot dogs. They could be boiled, broiled, rotisserie, charcoaled, and on and on. Hamburgers, on the other hand, were simplicity itself. The condiments were added to the hamburger, not built in. And there was only one way to prepare the hamburger—to grill it.⁴

Kroc and his associates experimented with each component of the hamburger to increase the efficiency of producing and serving it. For example, they started with partially sliced buns that arrived in cardboard boxes. But the griddle workers had to spend time opening the boxes, separating the buns, slicing them in half, and discarding the leftover paper and cardboard. Eventually, McDonald's found that buns sliced completely in half, separated, and shipped in reusable boxes could be used more efficiently. The meat patty received similar attention. For example, the paper between the patties had to have just the right amount of wax so that the patties would readily slide off the paper and onto the grill. Kroc's goal in these innovations was greater efficiency:

The purpose of all these refinements, and we never lost sight of it, was to make our griddle man's job easier to do quickly and well. And the other considerations of cost cutting, inventory control, and so forth were important to be sure, but they were secondary to the critical detail of what happened there at the smoking griddle. This was the vital passage of our *assembly-line*, and the product had to flow through it smoothly or the whole plant would falter. [italics added]⁵

The Fast-Food Industry: Speeding the Way From Secretion to Excretion

Today, all fast-food restaurants prepare their menu items on a kind of assembly line involving a number of people in specialized operations (for example, the burger "dresser"). The ultimate application of the assembly line to the fast-food process is, as was pointed out in the preceding chapter, Burger King's conveyor belt:

Inside a rectangular box standing about seven feet tall was a conveyor belt constructed of heavy-duty mesh wire. Above and below the conveyor were two flames. Burgers were placed in this mesh, and they moved along the belt at a pre-set speed, were cooked on both sides simultaneously by the two flames, and then spilled out the other end into holding trays.⁶

Then, there is Domino's system:

Lonnie Lane starts slapping and saucing: kneading and tossing the dough and then spooning the proper measure of sauce on to it. . . . He slides the tray down . . .

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and Victor Luna starts reaching for the toppings. A dozen bins are arrayed in front of him: cheese, pepperoni, green pepper. . . . Luna sprinkles stuff over the tray by the handful. . . . He eases the tray onto a conveyor belt that takes it through a 12-foot oven . . . in six minutes. . . . The store manager is dispatching waiting drivers and waiting drivers are folding pizza boxes. . . . The crew chief and quality controller . . . slices it with a pizza wheel and slides it into a box that already bears a computer label with the customer's address.⁷

Similar techniques are employed throughout the fast-food industry.

Getting diners into and out of the fast-food restaurant has also been streamlined. McDonald's has done "everything to speed the way from secretion to excretion."⁸ Parking lots adjacent to the restaurant offer readily available parking spots. It's a short walk to the counter, and although customers sometimes have to wait in line, they can usually quickly order, obtain, and pay for their food. The highly limited menu makes the diner's choice easy, in contrast to the many choices available in other restaurants. ("Satellite" and "express" locations are even more streamlined.) With the food obtained, it is but a few steps to a table and the beginning of the "dining experience." With little inducement to linger, diners generally eat quickly and then gather the leftover paper, Styrofoam, and plastic, discard them in a nearby trash receptacle, and get back in their cars to drive to the next (often McDonaldized) activity.

Those in charge of fast-food restaurants discovered that the drive-through window made this whole process far more efficient. Instead of requiring diners to undergo the "laborious" and "inefficient" process of parking the car, walking to the counter, waiting in line, ordering, paying, carrying the food to the table, eating, and disposing of the remnants, the drive-through window offered diners the streamlined option of driving to the window and driving off with the meal. Diners could eat while driving if they wanted to be even more efficient. The drive-through window is also efficient for the fast-food restaurant. As more and more people use the drive-through window, fewer parking spaces, tables, and employees are needed. Furthermore, consumers take their debris with them as they drive away, thereby reducing the need for trash receptacles and employees to empty those receptacles periodically.

Modern technology offers further advances in streamlining. Here is a description of some of the increased efficiency at a Taco Bell in California:

Inside, diners in a hurry for tacos and burritos can punch up their own orders on a touch-screen computer. Outside, drive-through customers see a video monitor flash back a list of their orders to avoid mistakes. They then can pay using a pneumatic-tube like those many banks employ for drive-up transactions. Their food, and their change, is waiting for them when they pull forward to the pickup window. And if the line of cars grows too long, a Taco Bell worker will wade in with a wireless keyboard to take orders.⁹

To further increase efficiency, an increasing number of fast-food restaurants are accepting credit and debit cards.

Home Cooking (and Related Phenomena): "I Don't Have Time to Cook"

In the early 1950s, the dawn of the era of the fast-food restaurant, the major alternative to fast food was the home-cooked meal, made mostly from ingredients purchased beforehand at various local stores and early supermarkets. This was clearly a more efficient way of preparing meals than earlier methods, such as hunting game and gathering fruits and vegetables before cooking.

The home cooking of the 1950s was made more efficient by the proliferation of refrigerators and gas and electric stoves. Cookbooks also made a major contribution to efficient home cooking. Instead of inventing a dish every time a meal was prepared, the cook could follow a recipe and thus more efficiently produce the dish.

Soon, the widespread availability of the home freezer led to the expanded production of frozen foods. The most efficient frozen food was (and for many still is) the "TV dinner." Swanson created its first TV dinner, its meal-in-a-box, in 1953 and sold 25 million of them in the first year.¹⁰ People could stock their freezers with an array of such dinners (Chinese, Italian, and Mexican dinners as well as a wide variety of "American" cooking) and readily pop them into the oven. The large freezer also permitted other efficiencies, such as making a few trips to the market for enormous purchases rather than making many trips for small ones. People could readily extract from their own freezers, when needed, a wide range of ingredients for a meal. Finally, freezers allowed people to cook large portions that could then be divided up, frozen, and defrosted for dinner.

Meals from the freezer began to seem comparatively inefficient, however, with the advent of microwavable meals.¹¹ Microwaves usually cook faster than other ovens, and people can prepare a wider array of foods in them. Perhaps most important, microwave ovens spawned a number of food products (including microwavable soup, pizza, hamburgers, fried chicken, french fries, and popcorn) reminiscent of the fare people have learned to love in fast-food restaurants. For example, one of the first microwavable foods produced by Hormel was an array of biscuit-based breakfast sandwiches popularized by McDonald's with its Egg McMuffin.¹² As one executive put it, "Instead of having a breakfast sandwich at McDonald's, you can pick one up from the freezer of your grocery store."¹³ In fact, many food companies now employ people who continually scout fast-food restaurants for new ideas. In some ways, "homemade" fast foods seem more efficient than the versions offered by fast-food restaurants.

Instead of getting into the car, driving to the restaurant, and returning home, people need only pop their favorite foods into the microwave. On the other hand, the efficiency of the microwaved meal suffers because it requires a prior trip to the market.

Supermarkets have long been loaded with other kinds of products that increase efficiency for those who want to “cook” at home. Instead of starting from scratch, the cook can use prepackaged mixes to make “homemade” cakes, pies, pancakes, waffles, and many other foods. No need to endlessly stir hot cereal; simply pour boiling water over the contents of a premeasured packet. No need to cook pudding from scratch or even to use the more efficient instant mixes; just pick up already-made pudding from the dairy cases at the supermarket. In fact, entire meals are now available right out of the box. Dinty Moore’s Classic Bakes are entire casserole dinners for four to five people and promise to be “hot and hearty, quick and convenient, ready in minutes.”

An increasingly important competitor is the fully cooked meal consumers may now buy at the supermarket. People can merely stop on the way home and purchase all the courses of a meal, which they “prepare” by unwrapping the packages—no cooking required.

Then there are the takeout meals from chains such as Boston Market (now a wholly owned subsidiary of McDonald’s with 630 company-owned restaurants in 28 states)¹⁴ and eatZi’s, which cater to the “meal replacement” market. Said one consumer, “I don’t have time to cook. I just worked all day, and I have other things to do, and this is going to be quick.”¹⁵ EatZi’s, for example, “sells 200 entrees and 1,500 fresh items daily, all prepared from scratch under the supervision of chefs trained at culinary schools. The meals include everything from macaroni and cheese to swordfish and sushi as well as sandwiches and salads.”¹⁶

The McDonaldization of food preparation and consumption also encompasses the booming diet industry. Diet books promising all sorts of shortcuts to weight loss are often at the top of the best-seller lists. Losing weight is normally difficult and time consuming, but diet books promise to make it easier and quicker. For those on a diet (and many people are on more or less perpetual diets), the preparation of low-calorie food has also been streamlined. Instead of cooking diet foods from scratch, dieters may now purchase an array of prepared foods in frozen or microwavable form. Those who do not wish to go through the inefficient process of eating these diet meals can “prepare” and consume products such as diet shakes and bars (Slim-Fast, for example) in a matter of seconds. Dieters seeking even greater efficiency have access to various pills that expedite weight loss—the now-banned “fen-phen” and others.

The issue of dieting points to new efficiencies outside the home as well, that is, to the growth of diet centers such as Jenny Craig, NutriSystem,¹⁷ and

Curves (really an exercise center with a highly efficient 30-minute workout).¹⁸ NutriSystem sells dieters, at substantial cost, prepackaged freeze-dried food. In what is close to the ultimate in streamlined cooking, all the dieter needs do is add water. Freeze-dried foods are also convenient for NutriSystem because they can be efficiently packaged, transported, and stored (and they are often conveniently popped into the microwave by the consumer).

Dieters' periodic visits to weight-loss clinics are also streamlined. At NutriSystem, a counselor is allotted 10 minutes with each client. During that brief time, the counselor takes the client's weight, blood pressure, and measurements, asks routine questions, fills out a chart, and devotes whatever time is left to "problem solving." If the session extends beyond the allotted 10 minutes and other clients are waiting, the receptionist will buzz the counselor's room.

Shopping: Creating Ever-More Efficient Selling Machines

Shopping for all kinds of goods and services, not just food, has also been streamlined. The department store obviously is a more efficient place in which to shop than a series of specialty shops dispersed throughout the city or suburbs. The shopping mall increases efficiency by bringing a wide range of department stores and specialty shops under one roof.¹⁹ It is cost-efficient for retailers because the collection of shops and department stores brings in throngs of people ("mall synergy"). And it is efficient for consumers because, in one stop, they can visit numerous shops, have lunch at a "food court" (likely populated by many fast-food chains), see a movie, have a drink, and go to an exercise or diet center.

The drive for shopping efficiency did not end with the malls. 7-Eleven and its clones (for example, Circle K, AM/PM, and Wawa) have become drive-up, if not drive-through, minimarkets. For those who need only a few items, pulling up to a highly streamlined 7-Eleven (over 30,000 locations worldwide) is far more efficient (albeit more costly) than running into a supermarket. Shoppers have no need to park in a large lot, obtain a cart, wheel through myriad aisles in search of needed items, wait in lines at the checkout, and then tote purchases back to a sometimes distant car. At 7-Eleven, they can park right in front and quickly find what they need. Like the fast-food restaurant, which offers a highly circumscribed menu, 7-Eleven has sought to fill its shops with a limited array of commonly sought goods: bread, milk, cigarettes, aspirin, even videos, and self-serve items such as hot coffee, hot dogs, microwaved sandwiches, cold soda, and Slurpees. 7-Eleven's efficiency stems from the fact that it ordinarily sells only one brand of each item, with many items unobtainable.

Even more efficient are the quick and convenient BrewThrus. Customers simply drive into a BrewThru, which is set up like a garage lined on both

sides with many convenience store products, especially beer and wine. An attendant comes out to the car to take your order, brings you what you want, takes your money, and you are back on the road in no time.²⁰

For greater selection, consumers must go to the relatively inefficient supermarket. Of course, supermarkets have sought to make shopping more efficient by institutionalizing 10-item-limit, no-checks-accepted lines for consumers who might otherwise frequent the convenience stores.

People who do not feel that they have the time to visit the mall are able to shop from the comfort of their homes through catalogs (for example, L.L. Bean or Lands' End).²¹ Another alternative to visiting the mall is home television shopping, although it may lead to many hours in front of the TV. Products are paraded before viewers, who can purchase them simply by phoning in and conveniently charging their purchases. The efficiency of shopping via catalogs and TV is increased even further with express package delivery systems, such as Federal Express.

The Internet has also greatly increased shopping efficiency. For example, instead of traveling to a book superstore or wandering from one small bookshop to another, you can access Amazon.com and have over a million different titles at your fingertips. After selecting and charging the titles you want, you just sit back and wait for the books to be delivered to your door. Of course, there are innumerable other Internet sites (e.g., overstock.com) where one can efficiently shop for virtually anything. Then there is ebay.com, which allows buyers and sellers to deal with one another in a highly efficient manner. "Virtual pharmacies" allow people to obtain prescription drugs without seeing a physician; consultations with "online doctors" are also available.²²

An often overlooked aspect of the efficiency of cybershopping is that it can be done while you are at work.²³ Although employers are likely to feel that shopping from work adversely affects worker efficiency, it is certainly very efficient from the perspective of the worker/consumer.

Of course, the drive to make Internet shopping ever more efficient continues. There are now shopping robots, or "shopbots," that automatically surf the Web for specific products, lowest prices, and shortest delivery dates.²⁴ For example, shop.lycos.com offers a shopbot that does comparison shopping for over 50,000 products. Google.com has a shopbot, or what it prefers to call a spider, named Froogle (froogle.google.com): "Browse by category—apparel, computers, flowers, whatever—or enter a query term, and it will present a list of matching products, each with a thumbnail sketch on the left and description, price and retailer on the right."²⁵

All types of shopping, but particularly ordering from distant merchants, have become far more efficient with the widespread use of credit cards. Shoppers need not go to the bank to load up on cash or return to the bank if they run out of cash at the mall. They can even shop in other countries

without purchasing foreign currency. Although paying with cash might still be more efficient, at least some clerks are surprised, even suspicious, when people make purchases, especially large ones, with cash. And credit cards are certainly a more efficient way of paying than writing out personal checks and being required to show several forms of identification.

The credit card has also McDonaldized the process of obtaining credit.²⁶ In the past, people had to go through lengthy and cumbersome application procedures to receive credit. Now, credit card companies have streamlined the process, even mailing millions of people notices that they have been preapproved for credit. Consumers now need to do next to nothing to receive a line of credit amounting to several hundred or, more likely, several thousand dollars. That's efficiency, even from the point of view of the customer. Of course, credit card companies see preapproval as an efficient means of recruiting large numbers of potential debtors who will pay near-usurious interest rates in exchange for the right to run up a balance.

Higher Education: Just Fill In the Box

The educational system, specifically the contemporary university (now often dubbed "McUniversity"),²⁷ offers many examples of the pressure for greater efficiency. One is the machine-graded, multiple-choice examination. In a much earlier era, students were examined individually in conference with their professors. This method may have been a good way to find out what students knew, but it was highly labor intensive and inefficient. Later, the essay examination became popular. Grading a set of essays was more efficient than giving individual oral examinations, but it was still relatively time consuming. Enter the multiple-choice examination, the grading of which was a snap. In fact, graduate assistants could grade it, making evaluation of students even more efficient for the professor. Now computer-graded examinations maximize efficiency for both professors and graduate assistants. They even offer advantages to students, such as making it easier to study and limiting the effect of the subjective views of the grader on the grading process.

Other innovations in academia are further streamlining the educational process. Even the multiple-choice examination leaves the professor saddled with the inefficient task of composing the necessary sets of questions. Furthermore, at least some of the questions have to be changed each semester to foil new students who gain possession of old exams. To ease the burden, textbook publishers started providing professors with manuals (free of charge) loaded with multiple-choice questions to accompany the textbooks required for use in large classes. The professor, however, still had to retype the questions or have them retyped. Now, publishers often provide these sets of questions on computer disks. All the professor needs to do is select the desired questions and let the printer do the rest. Another advance is the

advent of computer-based programs to grade essay examinations and term papers.²⁸ Professors may thus soon be able to return to assigning these more traditional types of schoolwork without any loss in efficiency. Indeed, with these great advances, professors can now choose to have very little to do with the entire examination process, from composing questions to grading, freeing up time for activities that many professors, but few students, value more highly, such as writing and research.

Publishers have provided other services to streamline teaching for those professors who adopt best-selling textbooks. A professor can receive many materials with which to fill class hours—lecture outlines, computer simulations, discussion questions, DVDs, movies, even ideas for guest lecturers and student projects. Professors who choose to use all these devices need do little or nothing on their own for their classes.

Another advance in efficiency in academia is the development of a relatively new type of service on college campuses. For a nominal fee, students may purchase lecture notes for their courses written by instructors, teaching assistants, and top-notch students. No more inefficient note taking; in fact, no more inefficient class attendance. Students are free to pursue more valuable activities, such as poring over arcane academic journals in the graduate library or watching the “soaps.”

One last academic efficiency worth noting is the ability of students to purchase already completed term papers online. There are a variety of Web sites²⁹ that now promise to deliver original, made-from-scratch research papers on any topic for a “low, low fee” of, say, \$34.95 for a complete paper, or a per-page charge of \$8.99. They even have quick service and express delivery available (\$14.99 per page if you need the paper in 48 hours) for those students who have put off academic dishonesty to the last moment. Beware, however, for there is also a host of other Web sites popping up that help professors detect plagiarism, thereby combating efficiency with efficiency.³⁰

Health Care: Docs-in-a-Box

It might be assumed that modern medicine is immune to the drive for efficiency and invulnerable to rationalization more generally.³¹ However, medicine has been McDonaldized. In fact, instances of what may be termed “assembly-line medicine” have been reported. One example is Dr. Denton Cooley (his “fetish is efficiency”), who gained worldwide fame for streamlining delicate open-heart surgery in a “heart surgery factory” that operated “with the precision of an assembly-line.”³² Even more striking is the following description of the Moscow Research Institute of Eye Microsurgery:

In many ways the scene resembles any modern factory. A conveyor glides silently past five work stations, periodically stopping, then starting again. Each

station is staffed by an attendant in a sterile mask and smock. The workers have just three minutes to complete their tasks before the conveyor moves on; they turn out 20 finished pieces in an hour.

Nearly everything else about the assembly line, however, is highly unusual: the workers are eye surgeons, and the conveyor carries human beings on stretchers. This is . . . where the production methods of Henry Ford are applied to the practice of medicine, . . . a “medical factory for the production of people with good eyesight.”³³

Such assembly lines are not yet the norm in medicine, but one can imagine that they will grow increasingly common in the coming years.

What is increasing is the use of robots to perform advanced forms of surgery. Perhaps the best known is the DaVinci system that is revolutionizing various forms of surgery (e.g., for prostate cancer). This minimally invasive system not only makes an operation more efficient but also makes the process more efficient from a patient’s point of view. Because only small incisions are made, hospital stays are reduced to perhaps a day, and post-operative recovery time is relatively brief.³⁴

Perhaps the best example of the increasing efficiency of medical practice in the United States is the growth of walk-in/walk-out surgical or emergency centers. “McDoctors” or “Docs-in-a-box” serve patients who want medical problems handled with maximum efficiency. Each center handles only a limited number of minor problems but with great dispatch. Although the patient with a laceration cannot be stitched as efficiently as a customer in search of a hamburger can be served, many of the same principles shape the two operations. For instance, it is more efficient for the patient to walk in without an appointment than to make an appointment with a regular physician and wait until that time arrives. For a minor emergency, such as a slight laceration, walking through a McDoctors is more efficient than working your way through a large hospital’s emergency room. Hospitals are set up to handle serious problems for which efficiency is not (yet) the norm, although some hospitals already employ specialized emergency room physicians and teams of medical personnel.

From an organizational point of view, a McDoctors can be run more efficiently than a hospital emergency room. Docs-in-a-box can also be more efficient than private doctors’ offices because they are not structured to permit the kind of personal (and therefore inefficient) attention patients expect from their private physicians.

Entertainment: Moving People (and Trash) Efficiently

Because of DVDs, and the stores that rent them, many people no longer deem it efficient to trek to their local theater to see a movie. Blockbuster,

the largest video rental firm in the United States, predictably “considers itself the McDonald’s of the video business.”³⁵ More than 43 million U.S. households have a Blockbuster membership, and many others belong to other, often local, video “clubs.”

However, the video rental business is in danger of replacement by even more efficient alternatives, such as Netflix (Blockbuster has a similar system) or the pay-per-view movies offered by many cable companies. For a nominal fee of less than \$20 a month, Netflix.com customers can keep a revolving library of up to three DVDs. There are never any late fees, and they even provide you with return envelopes, postage already paid. Netflix offers more than 75,000 titles and has over 6.3 million members.³⁶

Alternatively, instead of trekking to the video store, people can just turn to the proper channel and punch a few buttons to obtain a desired movie. Satellite dishes allow people access to a wide range of video offerings, including many movie channels and pay-per-view options. Video-on-demand systems, now available for an estimated 26.2 million viewers,³⁷ allow people to order any of the movies available in video stores from the comfort of their homes any time they wish.³⁸ Said one customer at a video store, “I’d definitely get video on demand. . . . I wouldn’t have to come over here to pick this up. And I wouldn’t have to bring it back tomorrow, which is going to be a pain in my butt.”³⁹ Now there is Vongo.com, which allows people to download, for a fee, any of its current catalog of over 2,000 movies. These can be viewed not only at home but on a variety of mobile systems. TIVO (and other systems like it) permit customers to record their favorite shows while they are watching something else or to rewind or pause live television. For those not satisfied with just a single offering, there is “picture-in-a-picture,” which enables them to view a movie while also watching a favorite TV show on an inset on the screen.

Keeping up with one’s reading is becoming more streamlined as well. Audiobooks (books-on-tape) was almost a billion-dollar-a-year industry in 2005 and is growing at the rate of 5% per year.⁴⁰ As of 2006, Audiobooks had at least 75 million listeners; it is estimated that almost a quarter of all American households have listened to a book-on-tape in the previous year.⁴¹ Audiobooks allow people to engage in other activities—commuting, walking, jogging, or watching a sports event on TV with the sound off—while listening to a book. One company specializes in renting books to truckers so that they can listen while they drive.⁴² Truckers can rent books at one spot and drop them off down the road at another. Cracker Barrel, a national restaurant chain with over 550 locations and in most states in the United States, offers a similar service to all drivers (about three-quarters of those who listen to audiobooks do so in the car),⁴³ who can pick up a book at one restaurant and drop it off in another, perhaps three states away.

However, downloading audiotapes from the Web eliminates the inefficiencies associated with picking up and dropping off tapes.⁴⁴ Further streamlining occurs when books-on-tape are recorded in abridged form. Gone are the “wasted” hours listening to “insignificant” parts of novels. With liberal cutting, *War and Peace* can be heard in one listening (perhaps while walking on a treadmill).

Another sort of efficiency in the entertainment world is the system for moving people developed by modern amusement parks, particularly Disneyland and Walt Disney World.⁴⁵ At Disney World and Epcot Center, for example, a vast highway and road system filters many thousands of cars each day into the appropriate parking lots. After each driver has been led to a parking spot (often with the help of information broadcast over the radio), jitneys come to whisk visitors to the gates of the park. Once in the park, visitors find themselves in a vast line of people on what is, in effect, a huge conveyor belt that leads them from one ride or attraction to another. Once they actually reach an attraction, some sort of conveyance—car, boat, submarine, plane, rocket, or moving walkway—moves them through and out of the attraction as rapidly as possible. The speed with which visitors move through each attraction enhances their experience and reduces the likelihood that they will question the “reality” of what they see. In fact, they are often not quite sure what they have witnessed, although it seems exciting.

Disney World has been victimized by its own success: Even its highly efficient systems cannot handle the hordes that descend on the park at the height of the tourist season. Visitors must face long lines at many of the most popular attractions. However, the waits would be far longer were it not for the efficiency with which Disney World processes people.

People are not the only things Disney World must process efficiently.⁴⁶ The throngs that frequent such amusement parks eat a great deal (mostly fast food, especially finger foods) and therefore generate an enormous amount of trash. If Disney World emptied trash receptacles only at the end of each day, the barrels would be overflowing most of the time. To prevent this eyesore (and it must be prevented since order and cleanliness—some would say sterility—are key components of the McDonaldised world in general and Disney World in particular), hordes of employees constantly sweep, collect, and empty trash. To take a specific example, bringing up the rear in the nightly Disney parade is a group of cleaners who almost instantly dispose of whatever trash and animal droppings have been left behind. Within a few minutes, they have eliminated virtually all signs that a parade has just passed by. Disney World also employs an elaborate system of underground tubes. Garbage receptacles are emptied into this system, which whisks the trash away at about 60 miles per hour to a central trash-disposal plant far from the view of visitors. Disney World is a “magic kingdom” in more ways than

one. Here is the way one observer compares another of the modern, highly rational amusement parks—Busch Gardens—to ancestors such as county fairs and Coney Island:

Gone is the dusty midway, the cold seduction of a carnie's voice, the garish, gaudy excitement and all the harsh promise evoked by a thousand yellow lights winking in darkness. In its place is a vast, self-contained environment, as complex as a small city and endowed with the kind of *efficiency* beyond the reach of most cities of any size. [italics added]⁴⁷

Online Dating: Show Your Interest With Just a "Wink"

For young people, dating has become "dated," inefficient in an era in which they can simply "hang out" together. However, hanging out becomes less possible as people grow a bit older, and dating becomes a stronger possibility. Dating is a highly inefficient process that has been streamlined as a result of the Internet and the ability to find and make a date on online services such as match.com.⁴⁸ With a single click one can find men or women within a specified age group and a given distance from one's zip code (no long, unnecessary trips needed). Key words are provided on the site (e.g., "charming," "handsome," "energetic," "liberal"), which make it easier to find a particular kind of person. It is possible to scroll quickly through hundreds of profiles of potential dates who meet given criteria. Once a profile of interest is located, a simple click indicates a "wink" at a potential date. Other clicks can organize potential dates into a "favorites" list so that, if one possibility does not pan out, another can be located quickly.

If a date is chosen, it is likely that sooner or later the relationship will not work out. Once that happens, it is possible to block the spurned suitor's access to one's profile. Best of all, a person can be back on the dating scene in an instant with a plethora of alternatives on the Web site or on one's favorites list.

Other Settings: Streamlining Relationships With Even the Pope

Modern health clubs, including chains such as Holiday Spa (and Bally), also strongly emphasize efficiency.⁴⁹ These clubs often offer virtually everything needed to lose weight and stay in shape, including exercise machines, running track, and swimming pool. The exercise machines are highly specialized so that people can efficiently work specific areas of the body. Running machines and the StairMaster increase cardiovascular fitness; weight-lifting machines increase strength and muscularity in targeted areas of the body. Many machines are even equipped with calorie counters that keep track of

exactly how many of those salty french fries are being burned away. Another efficiency associated with many of these machines is that people can do other things while exercising. Many clubs have television sets throughout the gym. The exerciser can also read, listen to music, or listen to an audiobook (probably abridged) while working out. All this is offered in the sterile environment often associated with McDonaldization.⁵⁰

Other examples of streamlining to increase efficiency abound. Drive-through windows streamline banking for both consumers and bankers. Drive-up kiosks receive film and send it off to a central location for development. Cell phones allow people to snap pictures and send them instantaneously to others with similar phones (or to e-mail accounts). Some McDonald's now have automated kiosks in their drive-through lanes where customers can rent and return DVDs (and it has experimented with a stand-alone kiosk in Washington, D.C., that also offers a variety of other products). At gasoline stations, customers put their credit cards into a slot on or near the pump and have their accounts automatically charged; when they finish pumping, they retrieve the receipt and the card with no contact with, or work done by, anyone working for the gas station. In the case of Mobil's "Speedpass," a transponder attached to a key tag or to a vehicle's rear window communicates with the pump via radio frequency signals (a similar technology is used on most of the nation's toll roads). When the car pulls up, the pump is activated, and the correct amount is charged to the driver's credit-card account.

Even religion has been streamlined, with drive-in churches and televised religious programs.⁵¹ In 1985, the Vatican announced that Catholics could receive indulgences ("a release by way of devotional practices from certain forms of punishment resulting from sin") through the Pope's annual Christmas benediction on TV or radio. Previously, Catholics had to engage in the far less efficient activity of going to Rome for the Christmas benediction and manifesting the "proper intention and attitude" to receive their indulgences in person.⁵² More generally, Christian bookstores are stocked with "how-to" books "claiming to be able to teach us the '10 steps to spiritual maturity' or how to be a successful parent in 60 minutes."⁵³

Streamlining is a defining characteristic of the Internet. For example, search engines such as Google, Yahoo!, Altavista, Hotbot, and EuroSeek now do a lot of the work that was formerly performed by computer users.⁵⁴ In the early days of the Internet, getting the information one wanted was a difficult matter requiring a great deal of skill and knowledge of arcane computer programs. Now, all users need do is access the search engine, type in the desired topic, and they are on their way. A process of de-skilling has taken place; skills once the possession of the user are now built into the system. The Internet also renders such activities as political campaigning,⁵⁵ medical symposia,⁵⁶ student research,⁵⁷ and romance (as we saw in the case of dating)⁵⁸ more efficient. Even more obviously, e-mail is far more streamlined than

“snail mail.”⁵⁹ No need to write a letter, put it in an envelope, seal it, paste on a stamp, mail it, and wait days or weeks for a reply. Now, all that is needed are a few keystrokes and a click on the “send” button. Replies may be received almost instantaneously. Better yet, if both you and the person you are e-mailing are simultaneously using the same Internet chat service (MSN Instant Messenger, etc.), you can have a “conversation” online without any need to send even an e-mail. A similar set of advantages has attracted people to e-cards for birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, and the like.⁶⁰

Text messaging is not only an efficient method of communication but has brought with it a great streamlining of speech among and between people. As a result, ever shorter ways of saying things are emerging, including the following:

- ◆ IM@A RK CONCERT
- ◆ CU THERE
- ◆ WENS THE PRTY?

Others require translation:

- ◆ 8=Ate
- ◆ CU L8R=See you later
- ◆ PCM=Please call me
- ◆ D8=Date
- ◆ :-)=Happy/Smiley
- ◆ ;-)=Winking
- ◆ :@)=Pig⁶¹

SIMPLIFYING THE PRODUCT

Many efficiencies have been gained by streamlining various processes. But another way to increase efficiency is by simplifying products. Consider the nature of the food served at fast-food restaurants. Complex foods based on sophisticated recipes are, needless to say, not the norm at fast-food restaurants. The staples of the industry are foods that require relatively few ingredients and are simple to prepare, serve, and eat.

In fact, fast-food restaurants generally serve “finger food,” food that can be eaten without utensils. Hamburgers, french fries, fried chicken, slices of pizza, and tacos are all finger foods.

Many innovations over the years have greatly increased the number and types of finger foods available. The Egg McMuffin is an entire breakfast—egg, Canadian bacon, English muffin—combined into a handy sandwich. Devouring such a sandwich is far more efficient than sitting down

with knife and fork and eating a plate full of eggs, bacon, and toast. The creation of the Chicken McNugget, perhaps the ultimate finger food, reflects the fact that chicken is pretty inefficient as far as McDonald's is concerned. The bones, gristle, and skin that are such a barrier to the efficient consumption of chicken have all been eliminated in the Chicken McNugget. Customers can pop the bite-sized morsels of fried chicken right into their mouths even as they drive. Were they able to, the mass purveyors of chicken would breed a more efficiently consumed chicken free of bones, gristle, and skin.⁶² McDonald's also offers an apple pie that, because it is completely encased in dough, can be munched like a sandwich.

McDonald's continues to experiment with new menu items, but whereas in the past the best ideas came from franchisees, it now has a serious chef in charge of its test kitchen in Oak Brook, Illinois, and innovations, not always successful, are flowing from there. One that has been successful is the snack wrap.⁶³ This is a classic McDonaldized food. For one thing, it is another form of "finger food" and can be eaten quickly and efficiently. For another, it uses ingredients already in McDonald's restaurants and used in other menu items—breaded chicken strips, flour tortillas, shredded lettuce and cheese, and ranch sauce.

The limited number of menu choices also contributes to efficiency in fast-food restaurants. McDonald's does not serve egg rolls (at least not yet), and Taco Bell does not offer fried chicken. In spite of what they tell people, fast-food restaurants are far from full-serve restaurants or the old cafeterias that offered a vast array of foods.

Advertisements like "We do it your way" or "Your way, right away" imply that fast-food chains happily accommodate special requests. But pity the consumer who has a special request in a fast-food restaurant. Because much of their efficiency stems from the fact that they virtually always do it one way—their way—the last thing fast-food restaurants want to do is do it your way. The typical hamburger is usually so thin that it can be cooked only one way—well done. Bigger burgers (the McDonald's Quarter Pounder, for example) could be prepared rare, but the fast-food restaurant insists, for the sake of efficiency (and these days for health reasons), that they all be cooked one way.

Customers with the temerity to ask for a less well-done burger or well-browned fries are likely to cool their heels for a long time waiting for such "exotica." Few customers are willing to wait because, after all, it defeats the main advantages of going to a fast-food restaurant—speed and efficiency. The limited number of menu items also allows for highly efficient ordering of supplies and food delivery. In sum, the idea behind what Henry Ford once said about cars has been extended to hamburgers: "Any customer can have a car painted any color that he wants so long as it is black."⁶⁴

Many products other than fast food have been simplified in the name of efficiency. AAMCO Transmissions works mainly on transmissions, and Midas Muffler largely restricts itself to the installation of mufflers. H&R Block does millions of simple tax returns in its nearly 9,000 offices. Because it uses many part-time and seasonal employees and does not offer the full array of tax and financial services available from a CPA, it is undoubtedly not the best place to have complicated tax returns completed.⁶⁵ “McDentists” may be relied on for simple dental procedures, but people would be ill advised to have root canal work done there. Pearle Vision centers offer eye examinations, but people should go to an eye doctor for any major vision problem.

USA TODAY's highly simplified “News McNuggets” were anticipated by the various digests, most notably the still popular *Reader's Digest*. The original aim of *Reader's Digest* was to offer magazine articles that “could be written to please the reader, to give him the nub of the matter in the new fast-moving world of the 1920s, instead of being written at length and with literary embellishments to please the author or the editor.”⁶⁶ Other precursors to *USA TODAY* are magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Business Week*. As two observers of the latter noted, “The message is that busy executives don't have time to read in depth so don't waste time reading the *Wall Street Journal* [which in 2007 has itself been made smaller, simpler, and easier to read] every day when one quick bite of *Business Week* once a week is sufficient to give you a step ahead of the competition.”⁶⁷

PUTTING CUSTOMERS TO WORK

A final mechanism for increasing efficiency in a McDonaldizing world is to put customers to work. Fast-food customers perform many more unpaid tasks compared with those who dine at full-service restaurants:

A few years ago, the fast food chain McDonald's came up with the slogan “We do it all for you.” In reality, at McDonald's, we [the customers] do it all for them. We stand in line, take the food to the table, dispose of the waste, and stack our trays. As labor costs rise and technology develops, the consumer often does more and more of the work.⁶⁸

However, although it is efficient for the fast-food restaurant to have consumers wait in line, waiting in line is inefficient for consumers. It is efficient for fast-food restaurants to have the diner do much of the work done by employees in a traditional restaurant, but is it efficient for the consumer? Is it efficient to order your own food rather than having a waiter do it? Or to bus your own paper, plastic, and Styrofoam rather than having a busperson do it?

The tendency to put customers to work was underscored by Steak 'n Shake (over 430 restaurants in the United States) TV advertisements describing fast-food restaurants as “workaurants.”⁶⁹ In contrast, Steak 'n Shake emphasizes its use of china plates and the fact that the food is actually served by a wait staff.

The salad bar is a classic example of putting the consumer to work. The customer “buys” an empty plate and then ambles over to the salad bar to load up on the array of vegetables and other foods available that day. Quickly seeing the merit in this system, many supermarkets installed their own, more elaborate salad bars. The salad lover can thus work as a salad chef at lunch hour in the fast-food restaurant and then do it all over again in the evening at the supermarket. The fast-food restaurant and the supermarket achieve huge gains in efficiency because they need only a small number of employees to keep the various compartments well stocked.

There is an all-you-can-eat restaurant chain, Sweet Tomatoes, with about 100 outlets throughout the United States. Its main attraction is a lengthy salad bar that customers encounter as they enter the restaurant. At lunch and dinner times, there are often lengthy lines on both sides of the salad bar. In fact, at particularly busy times the lines snake out the door and into the parking lot. As diners move slowly along the salad bar (it may take some time to get there), they fill their plates with the desired foods. Because it is impossible to return to the start of the line once the trek down the salad bar has been completed, some customers fill two, or more, plates with salad. At the end of the salad bar are two cash registers where those in each line pay for their food. Various other foods and desserts are available at counters in the restaurant, and after they have finished their salads, customers trek to them, sometimes over and over again, to pick them up and return to their tables to devour them.⁷⁰

In a number of fast-food restaurants, including Roy Rogers,⁷¹ consumers are expected to take a naked burger to the “fixin’ bar” to add lettuce, tomatoes, onions, and so on. The customers thus end up logging a few minutes a week as sandwich makers. At Burger King and most other fast-food franchises, people must fill their own cups with ice and soft drinks, thereby spending a few moments as “soda jerks.” Similarly, customers serve themselves in the popular breakfast buffets at Shoney’s or the lunch buffets at Pizza Hut.

Once again taking the lead, at least in the fast-food industry (a similar technology is being used in airports to buy plane tickets), McDonald’s is testing self-ordering kiosks in some restaurants that allow customers to use a touch screen to place their food orders. They do what counter people at McDonald’s currently do—find and touch the picture on the screen that matches the food being ordered.⁷²

Shopping also offers many examples of imposing work on the consumer. The old-time grocery store, where the clerk retrieved the needed

items, has been replaced by the supermarket, where a shopper may put in several hours a week “working” as a grocery clerk, seeking out wanted (and unwanted) items during lengthy treks down seemingly endless aisles. Having obtained the groceries, the shopper then unloads the food at the checkout counter and, in some cases, even bags the groceries.

Of course, some supermarket checkout stands now ask the customer to do the scanning, thereby eliminating the need for a checkout clerk.⁷³ The systems that allow customers to pay with credit cards eliminate the need for cashiers. The developer of one scanning system predicted that soon “self-service grocery technology could be as pervasive as the automatic cash machines used by bank customers.”⁷⁴ One customer, apparently a strong believer in McDonaldization, said of such a system, “It’s quick, easy and efficient. . . . You get in and out in a hurry.”⁷⁵ But as an official with a union representing supermarket clerks put it, “To say it’s more convenient for the customer is turning the world upside down. . . . In general, making customers do the work for themselves is not customer service.”⁷⁶

Virtually gone are gas station attendants who fill gas tanks, check the oil, and clean windows; people now put in a few minutes a week as unpaid attendants. One exception to this rule is in the state of New Jersey, where it is actually against the law to pump your own gas. Although one might think that eliminating the gas station attendant leads to lower gasoline prices (and indeed it does in the short run), a comparison of gas prices at stations with and without attendants shows little difference in price. In the end, the gasoline companies and service station owners simply found another way to force the consumer to do the work employees once had to be paid to perform.

In some doctors’ offices, patients must now weigh themselves and take their own temperatures. More important, patients have been put to work in the medical world through the use of an increasingly wide array of do-it-yourself medical tests. Two basic types are available: monitoring instruments and diagnostic devices.⁷⁷ Monitoring devices include blood pressure monitors and glucose and cholesterol meters. Among the diagnostic tests are pregnancy detectors, ovulation predictors, HIV test kits, and fecal occult blood detectors. Thus, patients are now being asked to familiarize themselves with technologies that were formerly the exclusive province of physicians, nurses, or trained technicians. In addition, patients are being asked to sample bodily fluids (blood, urine) or by-products (fecal matter) that were once handled (very carefully) by professional medical people. But in an era of high medical costs, it is cheaper and more efficient (no unnecessary trips to the doctor’s office or to the lab) for patients to monitor and test themselves. Such home testing may identify problems that otherwise might not be discovered, but it can also lead to unnecessary worry, especially in the case of “false positive” results. In either case, many of us are now “working,” at least part-time, as unpaid medical technicians.

The automated teller machine (ATM) in the banking industry allows everyone to work, for at least a few moments, as an unpaid bank teller (and often pay fees for the privilege). To encourage the use of ATMs, some banks have begun charging a fee for using human tellers.⁷⁸ The growing reluctance of customers to enter the bank (possibly out of a reluctance to pay for human interaction), in turn, has led to longer lines at the ATM machines, ironically reducing their efficiency.

Phone companies now make people put in a few minutes a day as operators. Instead of asking a long-distance operator to make calls, people are urged to dial such calls themselves, thereby requiring them to keep lengthy lists of phone numbers and area codes. Instead of simply dialing “0” to make a collect long-distance call, people must now remember long sets of numbers to save money. Another such effort by the phone companies involves having people look up numbers in the phone book rather than call an operator for information. To discourage people from using the operator for such information, there is now likely to be a fairly hefty charge for the service. In the state of Washington, consumers can now even install their own telephones simply by plugging them into the jacks, dialing 811, and answering a series of questions posed by a computer by punching digits on the phone.⁷⁹

When a receiver fails, Dish Network mails its customers a new one as a replacement. The customer is expected to return the defective one in the same box that contained the new one. More important, it is up to the consumer to install the new receiver. There is, of course, help available by phone if necessary—and it is necessary! Dish will send someone to install the new receiver, but the time delay involved and the relatively high cost discourage most customers from taking this option.

When calling many businesses these days, instead of dealing with a human operator, people must push a bewildering sequence of numbers and codes before they get, they hope, the desired extension.⁸⁰ Here is the way one humorist describes such a “conversation” and the work involved for the caller:

The party you are trying to reach—Thomas Watson—is unavailable at this time. To leave a message, please wait for the beep. To review your message, press 7. To change your message after reviewing it, press 4. To add to your message, press 5. To reach another party, press the star sign and enter the four-digit extension. To listen to Muzak, press 23. To transfer out of phone mail in what I promise you will be a futile effort to reach a human, press 0—because we treat you like one.⁸¹

Instead of being interviewed by the government census taker, people usually receive a questionnaire (one that is supposedly self-explanatory) in the mail to fill out on their own. The self-response rate for occupied housing

units in the last (2000) census was 75.5%. In other words, a real-life census taker was used only 24.5% of the time to obtain the information, and even then they were deployed only after residents failed to respond to the mailed questionnaire.⁸²

Many of these examples may seem trivial. Clearly, trolling the salad bar or punching numbers on a computer screen is not highly burdensome. But the ubiquity of these activities means that the modern consumer spends an increasingly significant amount of time and energy doing unpaid labor. Although organizations are realizing greater efficiencies, customers are thus often sacrificing convenience and efficiency.