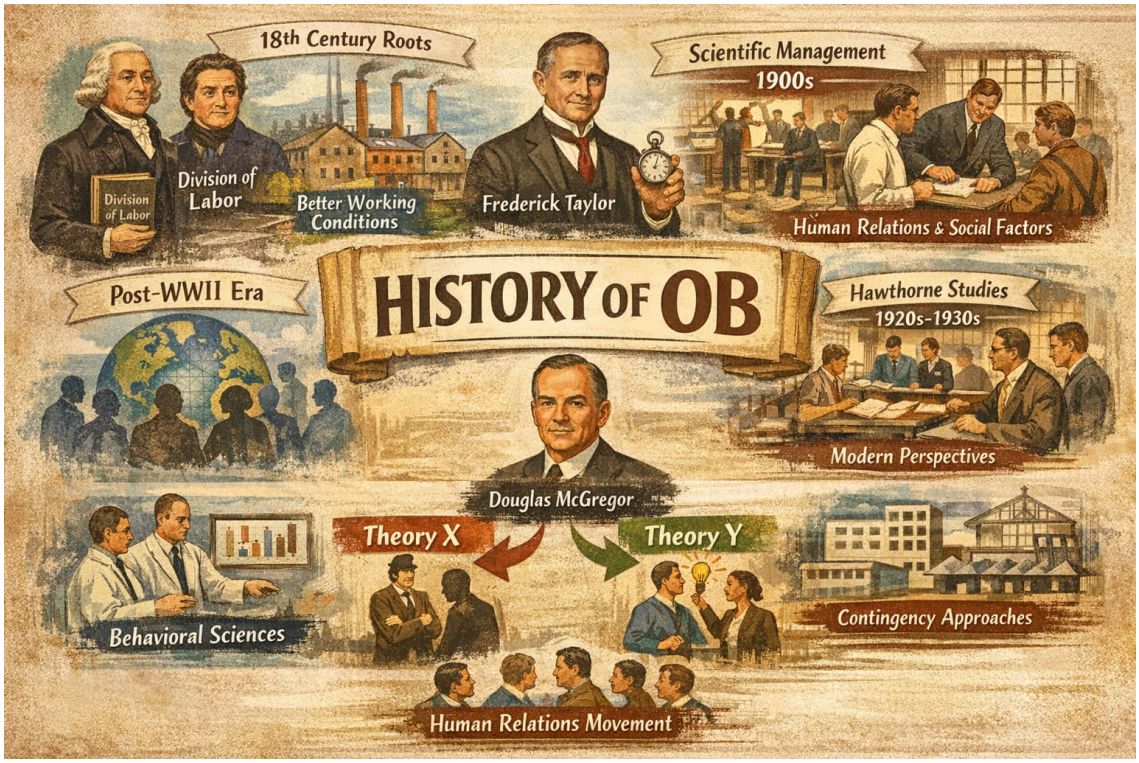
History of Organizational Behaviour (OB)



OB's roots trace to the late 18th century with Adam Smith's division of labor and early industrial thinkers like Robert Owen advocating better working conditions. The field formalized in the early 20th century via Frederick Taylor's scientific management (1900s), emphasizing efficiency, followed by the Hawthorne Studies (1920s-1930s) that highlighted human relations and social factors over purely mechanical approaches. Post-WWII developments integrated behavioral sciences, evolving through human relations movements, Theory X/Y (McGregor), and modern contingency perspectives.

The field of Organizational Behaviour developed gradually as scholars and researchers tried to understand how individuals and groups behave in organizations. Organizational Behaviour combines ideas from psychology, sociology, management, and anthropology to explain

workplace behaviour. The development of OB can be understood through several important historical stages.

1. Classical Approach (Late 19th Century – Early 20th Century)

The classical approach was the earliest stage in the development of organizational studies. During this period, the main focus was on increasing efficiency, productivity, and proper management of workers. Organizations were viewed as machines and workers were expected to follow strict rules and procedures.

One of the most influential thinkers of this period was Frederick Winslow Taylor, who introduced the concept of Scientific Management. Taylor believed that work could be studied scientifically to find the most efficient way of performing tasks. He emphasized time-and-motion studies, specialization of work, and financial incentives for workers.

Another important contributor was Henri Fayol, who developed fourteen principles of management such as division of work, authority, discipline, unity of command, and centralization. Fayol focused on the role of managers and how organizations should be structured for effective functioning.

Similarly, Max Weber introduced the idea of bureaucracy. Weber suggested that organizations should operate through formal rules, hierarchy, and clear division of authority. According to him, bureaucracy would ensure fairness, efficiency, and predictability in organizations.

Although the classical approach improved efficiency, it paid little attention to workers' emotions, needs, and social relationships.



2. Human Relations Movement (1930s–1950s)

The limitations of the classical approach led to the development of the Human Relations Movement. Researchers began to realize that employees are not simply machines; they have emotions, attitudes, and social needs that influence their work performance.

A major milestone in this movement was the Hawthorne Studies, conducted at the Western Electric Company in Chicago. These studies were led by Elton Mayo and his colleagues. The research initially examined how physical conditions such as lighting affected productivity. Surprisingly, the results showed that productivity improved mainly because workers felt valued and received attention from researchers and supervisors.

The Hawthorne studies highlighted the importance of social relationships, group dynamics, and employee morale in the workplace. As a result, managers began to pay more attention to communication, leadership style, and employee satisfaction.

3. Behavioral Science Approach (1950s–1970s)

The behavioral science approach further expanded the understanding of human behaviour in organizations by applying theories from psychology and social sciences. Researchers focused on motivation, leadership, personality, attitudes, and group behaviour.

One important contributor was Abraham Maslow, who proposed the Hierarchy of Needs Theory. Maslow suggested that human needs are arranged in five levels: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. According to him, employees are motivated to work when these needs are gradually satisfied.

Another influential thinker was Douglas McGregor, who introduced Theory X and Theory Y. Theory X assumes that workers dislike work and need strict supervision, while Theory Y assumes that employees are self-motivated and capable of responsibility. McGregor encouraged managers to adopt a more positive and supportive approach toward employees.

In addition, Frederick Herzberg developed the Two-Factor Theory of Motivation. He explained that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are influenced by two types of factors: hygiene factors (such as salary, working conditions, and company policies) and motivators (such as achievement, recognition, and responsibility).

This stage greatly contributed to the scientific study of human behaviour in organizations.

4. Modern Organizational Behaviour (1980s–Present)

Modern Organizational Behaviour takes a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach. It integrates knowledge from psychology, sociology, economics, and management to understand complex workplace behaviour.

Modern OB focuses on many important topics such as leadership styles, organizational culture, communication, teamwork, decision-making, job satisfaction, organizational change, and employee well-being. It also emphasizes the importance of diversity, globalization, ethics, and work–life balance in modern organizations.

Researchers and managers now recognize that organizational success depends not only on technology and structure but also on the effective management of human resources.