

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
WAGE AND HOUR DIVISION
Washington

LEARNING PERIOD FOR TELEPHONE OPERATORS RECOMMENDED
FOR INDEPENDENT EXCHANGES

A learning period of 320 hours or approximately 8 weeks, at a subminimum rate of 25 cents per hour, was found to be necessary in order to prevent curtailment of opportunities for employment of telephone operators in the Independent Branch of the Telephone Industry in a determination made today by Dr. Gustav Peck, Assistant Director of the Hearings Branch of the Wage and Hour Division.

Colonel Philip B. Fleming, Administrator of the Wage and Hour Division, approved the findings and determination of Dr. Peck, who presided at a hearing held last December 7 to determine the necessity of a learning period at wages less than the minimum for commercial switchboard operators. The hearing was held on the application of the United States Independent Telephone Association and others.

Under the findings and determination, exchanges with 500 or more stations in the Independent Branch of the Telephone Industry would be permitted to employ learners for a period of 320 hours (approximately 8 weeks) at 25 cents an hour instead of the minimum wage of 30 cents an hour provided for in Section 6 of the Fair Labor Standards Act. Operators in exchanges with less than 500 stations were exempted from the provisions of the Act by an amendment passed at the last session of Congress.

Dr. Peck's determination would permit the employment of one learner in an exchange employing up to eight operators; two learners in an exchange employing from nine to eighteen operators; three in exchanges employing from 19 to 30 operators; four learners in exchanges employing from 31 to 44 operators; and one learner for each additional 15 operators employed in larger exchanges.

Today's ruling by Colonel Fleming applies only to independent telephone companies. In his findings, Dr. Peck said, "The testimony received at the hearing . . . relates only to independent telephone companies . . . not owned or controlled by the American Telephone and Telegraph Company."

Evidence at the hearing disclosed that out of 12,000 independent telephone exchanges in the country, 9,900 have less than 500 stations. Today's determination, therefore, applies only to 2,100 exchanges which employ approximately 12,500 operators.

The evidence indicated, Dr. Peck found, that while an operator handles calls efficiently within a period of 8 weeks or less, her speed increases only with experience. Quoting from the record of testimony, it was stated by one witness that the average beginner after two weeks handles only about 50 calls per hour while a girl with a year's experience can handle 150 or more calls per hour. Another witness testified that an inexperienced operator handles from 30 to 50 calls per hour after two weeks, while an experienced operator handles from 150 to 225 calls per hour.

Mrs. Mayme Workman, Traffic Supervisor of the Illinois (independent) Telephone Association, in testifying at the hearing, said: "Most girls have rigid jaws, stiff lips and lazy tongues." She added that the elimination of these characteristics is the first essential in the primary training of operators.

The Act provides that any aggrieved party may file an application for a hearing before the Administrator within 15 days after the finding and determination are approved. Should there be no application filed within that period, the determination will become final.

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