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**The New Zealand Whitegoods Industry - From
Fordism to Single Batch Mass Production**

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Abstract

The establishment of the New Zealand whitegoods industry was largely a product of the regime of accumulation which solidified out of a series of structural reforms set in place during the late 1930s and 1940s. Central to the regime, which flourished from the 1950s through to the early 1970s, was the expansion of a highly protected, import substituting, manufacturing sector supported by an internationally competitive and technologically dynamic agricultural sector. Throughout this period the whitegoods industry mimicked the fordist technological and competitive principles of North American and Western European whitegoods manufacturers. This pattern of development saw the level of technological sophistication and concentration within the industry increase steadily throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the post-war regime of accumulation slide into an endemic state of crisis. This triggered a wide-ranging dismantling of the institutional matrix which had structured the post-war economy, in the hope that by allowing capital the freedom to do as it will New Zealand would move on to a new, sustainable, growth path. The success of these reforms remains to be seen. They have, however, greatly altered the competitive environment within which the whitegoods industry has been operating - increasing the volatility of the local market and exposing the industry to international competition. This has led to the withdrawal from the industry of all but two of the companies which survived into the 1980s.

Through the development of a range of technological and organisational innovations which transcend the limitations which fordist production systems place on companies which produce only on a small scale, one company (Fisher and Paykel) has managed not only to continue to dominate the local whitegoods market, but also to expand into international markets. Central to Fisher and Paykel's production systems - which can usefully be labelled single batch mass production - is the achievement of a high level of market flexibility. The flexibility afforded by these systems allow Fisher and Paykel to respond rapidly to changes within its existing markets and to opportunities which arise in new markets. The other company which has survived, Simpson (NZ) which produces only stoves and cooktops, has on a much smaller and over a much shorter time scale attempted to develop similar flexible production systems.

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