

The Taylored Office: Technology, Power and Expertise in Systematic Office Management

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In early twentieth century America the concepts of efficiency, modernity and systematic rationalization held enormous cultural power. They were resources upon which engineers, social reformers and advertisers drew. The autonomous professional expert was a particularly important icon, whose authority to command derived from the mastery of a body of empirical scientific knowledge. But different groups deployed such concepts and roles to different ends.

This paper explores how two particular groups mobilized these cultural resources within the world of corporate administration: office technology vendors and office management experts. What was their relationship, and how can we understand the claims made by advocates of both to supply rational systems to the American office? I address the strengths and limitations of claims to organizational authority made on the basis of technical knowledge, framing my narrative in several broader contexts: the emergence of accountants as guardians of corporate information, the feminization of office work, and the roles of systematization in the professionalization of management.

The first group, advocates of systematic Office Management, attempted to transfer Taylorism (and related forms of systematic management) to the office. These managers, academics and consultants saw this as a means to an end: the creation of the Office Manager as a respected and autonomous professional executive. This role would consolidate technical mastery of efficient office practice, the personnel management of clerks, and the control of corporate information processing in the hands of a single figure. I illustrate the development of the putative profession through textbooks, the publications and proceedings of the two professional societies of office managers and the journal System: The Magazine of Business Practice. Technologies were instrumental to this vision, particularly forms, desks and filing systems. But like office machinery, these devices were merely tools in the hands of the expert. Scientific Management experts claimed that technology and predefined systems could never be truly efficient without a fundamental commitment to scientific experimentation and their technocratic authority.

The second group, vendors of office machinery and office systems similarly claimed to offer efficiency and expertly designed systems. But the archival materials of Remington Rand show its salesmen did not attempt to usurp the established power of managers or to criticize existing practice. Rather, scientific and rational efficiency had been engineered into the forms, files and machines themselves and could be attained simply purchasing a suitable system. My analysis of the survey materials of the Women's Bureau project of 1930 (the most comprehensive made of office technologies and management), shows that most firms were happy to introduce technology in a conservative and piecemeal way, and that systematic management techniques were rare in even the largest firms.

Although the office machinery industry boomed between 1910 and 1930, the professionalization of Office Management enjoyed limited success. I conclude that corporations ultimately favored the tangible and unthreatening presence of office machinery and the calculated flattery of its salesman over the radical claims of the scientific manager.