Technology versus Technocracy in the Progressive Office, 1917-1931

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Topic: My paper examines the relationship of new technologies to the reorganization of clerical work in large, service sector offices in the early twentieth century. It focuses on the relationship of the then-booming office machine industry with the newly established scientific office management movement. This movement, centered on the National Office Management Association and its founder William Henry Leffingwell, sought to elevate the office manager to a top level position, while asserting control over administrative matters by reorganizing clerical work according to the doctrines of Taylorism. The office manager would become an expert systematizer and administrative engineer. The office managers were perhaps the first organized group to try and build for themselves a corporate niche as functional experts in the tools and techniques of efficient administration. They claimed technical expertise to justify wresting responsibility over important areas of management from general managers.

Argument: Hitherto, the technocratic agenda of the office management movement and the actual technologies (files, dictating machines, bookkeeping machines and the like) promoted by the office equipment industry have been seen by many historians as closely allied. Both were promoted with a shared rhetoric of science, efficiency and system. My argument, however, is that the installation of office technology was far more often a substitute for the fundamental reorganization of office work demanded by the systematizers than a sign that this had been completed. Few firms granted high status to office managers, and few implemented the key principles of scientific office management. New technology was an alternative and symbolic way of demonstrating efficiency, particularly when overseen by a sales team trained to mimic business consultants. I finishing by sketching some of the similarities between the problems faced by the office managers and those haunting more recent groups of specialists occupying the technology/management border, such as corporate information systems staff.

Evidence: These claims are substantiated by a detailed examination and tabulation of original survey materials gathered for the 1930-31 Women's Bureau survey of clerical work practices and office technology usage, the most detailed and extensive of its kind. I also refer to newsletters and textbooks published by the office management movement, to advertisements (many to be shown during the presentation) for office technology placed in business periodicals such as *System*, and to sales practices documented in the Hagley archival records of several office machine companies assimilated into Remington Rand.

Relationship to Existing Scholarship: The paper builds on and integrates two important and well developed bodies of work. Authors such as Margery Davies and Sharon Strom have looked the mechanization and systematization of clerical work, but from a labor history viewpoint concerned primarily with deskilling and gender. They thus paid little attention to the attempts to the scientific office management movement to assert control over managers as well as workers, and have blurred the technological and technocratic. Historians interested in management, most notably JoAnne Yates and Olivier Zunz, have explored the role of technology and systematization in transforming managerial practice. However, they have so far paid less attention to the creation of specialist managerial identities such as office manager, or to the symbolic power of technology as a substitute for systematization.