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Automation and the Clerk
Counter Information Services


The most widespread application of new technology, and the area where the largest number of jobs is immediately at risk, is within the office. Factory workers are already familiar with the drive for greater productivity: the breaking down of each job into its simplest component parts; the meticulous measurement of each worker's performance: the removal of all individual initiative; the pacing of work by machine rather than by the operator; the necessity to spend every second of the day at the machine; the constant drive to speed-up; and the perpetual attempt to cut jobs. Now these techniques are within the reach of the office manager as well as the plant manager. The effect on job opportunity, particularly for women, will be drastic.

There are now more women in paid employment than ever before. In the UK there are 9·1 million women workers compared to 13·1 million men – they form 41 per cent of the workforce. . . .

The increase in the number of employed women has not been matched by a decline in the traditional distinctions between men's and women's work. Women are still concentrated in certain industries and in particular, predominantly low paid, occupations. Over 70 per cent of women are employed in the service industries, as compared to only 40 per cent of men. No less than 40 per cent, two out of five, of all women workers are in clerical occupations: clerks, typists, secretaries, office machine operators, telephonists and similar jobs. There are three million women
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office workers. The importance of clerical and office work to the female workforce cannot be overstated.

The number of office workers has been growing steadily – office wage costs are increasingly eating into company profits. . . . The cost of running offices, mainly wages, accounts for half of the total operating costs of all US corporations. In government and service industries such as banks and insurance firms, the office wage bill is a full three-quarters of total costs. In the UK, wages now account for nearly 80 per cent of all office costs. While costs have doubled over the last decade, office productivity has remained almost stagnant. US estimates reckon that it has increased by only 4 per cent while, in the same ten years, industrial productivity nearly doubled. This is not surprising given that whereas there is some $25,000 of investment behind every production worker, there is only $2,000 worth for each office worker.

As office employment and wage costs have soared, the price of office automation equipment had been falling by about 10 per cent per year. Rationalisation of the office has become a real and economic possibility. . . .

Silicon technology, initially developed in the field of computers, has not only spread into the areas of office equipment and telecommunications, it has converged the three areas. The combination, known as ‘information technology’, opens the door for the automated office from which paper, as the medium for handling information, has practically disappeared. Office work is largely concerned with acquiring, storing, transforming, presenting and sending information. While clerical workers transform, store and transmit information, executive level office workers assimilate existing information, manipulate it and generate new information.

Information originates as speech, typed or handwritten text and accounts, diagrams or photographs. The new technology can deal with all these forms: word processors deal with text; data processors with accounts; electronic telephone systems with speech; and facsimile transmitters with images. The computer services all of them. . . .

Both the word processor and the accounting machine are now based on very similar technology, utilising the microcomputer or a larger, centralised computer. Although we will deal here mainly with word processors, as a new phenomenon dramatically affecting office employment, probably just as many jobs will be