

New Office Technology: Review and Discussion by the *Technological Change Committee, Australian Science and Technology Council (ASTEC)* (AGPS, Canberra, 1986) pp. vi + 115.

Reviews of this type have an unfortunate tendency, perhaps an inevitable tendency, to straddle stools — and sometimes fall between them. It seems to me that reviews are obliged to range over a vast quantity of literature while having to make some useful observations, otherwise they are not worth the paper they are printed on. One might just as well read state-of-the-art accounts in journals, and they cost very little. I am afraid this publication has not succeeded in avoiding the twin perils of reports-as-reviews. Thus it offers a sundry collection of notes and comments about office technology issues (technologies and the office, trends and perspectives, office technology and the organisation, office technology and labour, new office technology and government) without making any real contribution to current wisdom. Only the empirical data (which is under-utilised in the body of the book, but which forms important appendices) can claim to be really useful. I shall deal with the empirical data first.

The Information Research Unit at the University of Queensland was asked in September 1984 to undertake a survey of a random sample of firms throughout Australia. The aim of the exercise was to discover what changes there had been to the efficiency and effectiveness of office functions in the sample population, paying special attention to the extent to which expected cost reductions and increased efficiency were achieved in practice. Of 4000 firms to which questionnaires were sent, 745 firms (19 per cent) replied.

The information gleaned from this survey was supplemented by a number of case studies of public sector organisations. These are the subject of Appendix B in this report. Together they form some of the rare first-hand information available on what Australian firms are doing about new office technology and give some valuable insights into how Australian management is coping with this very expensive and complex phenomenon. We learn that most respondents were unable to assess what effects the new technology has had on their organisations, though 58 per cent of respondents were able to say that higher levels of productivity were discernible in some office functions, such as the production of letters. It comes as no surprise that, given the high cost of the new technology, the most intensive and extensive users of new office technology are the large firms, particularly those with overseas connections. Particularly interesting, though worrying, comments are made from page 88 to the effect that over 50 per cent of respondents felt that management lacked the knowledge to make confident decisions about the types of equipment to buy, nearly half the respondents felt that management did not know how to evaluate the systems, and nearly two-thirds believed that management did not know how to get the full benefit from the systems.

I find the literature review uneven and poorly informed. Some of it, particularly the position statements of 1979-1980, is no longer terribly relevant. It should, perhaps, really be restricted to providing some sort of historical perspective, rather than being cited as seminal information for the latter half of this decade.

The cardinal issues dealt with needed to be defined more rigorously. Giuliano's 1982 definition of the office, which is used unaltered in the

Introduction, is clearly inadequate in 1986 as networking becomes ever more persuasive, portable computers make a mockery of the office as a location, and distributed processing makes obsolete notions of offices tied to a time and a place. Besides, the survey of 1984, on which at least part of this report is based, uses a different definition — a better one as it avoids some of the worst aspects of Giuliano's. Other critical concepts, such as efficiency and effectiveness, are not formally defined.

Whereas it may be argued that how one classifies the technology is a matter of preference, it should also be pointed out that the system used in this report of separating office automation as a distinct category from other types of office technology does not appear to make sense. Does not office technology constitute the tools by which office automation is achieved? Under the schema used in this report, where would 'smart' copiers which are also laser printers, fit in? They have been in use for years. A better exposition of office technology and automation is probably furnished by Meyer's classification of office automation items, based on their application rather than their characteristics.¹ Other topics, such as repetitive strain injury (p. 55), are dealt with in such a cursory manner that the information provided can be ambiguous or even misleading.

I suspect that it has been a devil of a report to write. Each of its chapters could quite comfortably have been a report in itself. It should, perhaps, never have been attempted in this form.

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REFERENCES

1. N.D. Meyer, 'Office automation: a progress report', *Office: Technology and People*, 1, 1982, pp. 107-21.

Theories of Industrial Society by Richard Badham
(Croom Helm, London, 1986) pp. 188, \$49.95, ISBN 0-7099-3921-3.

Once upon a time, a great beast cast its shadow over the kingdom. Six wise men sought to tame it. But the beast grew so vast that the wise men failed, though they wrote long treatises on its nature. In time the king placed it on his coat of arms. Still the beast continued to dazzle the wise men, their students, and their students. Eventually they named the beast 'Industrial Society'.

The wise men — Henri de Saint-Simon, August Comte, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber — also founded the social sciences. They contributed the basis for the major theories and methods. According to Richard Badham, their obsession with industrial society theory led to five main themes which continue to dominate our thinking in the social sciences. First, we think of the industrial revolution as the great divide between a primitive past and the modern present. All of our theories, capitalist and