Failure as a Cultural Resource: Early Computer Systems for Corporate Management

During the 1950s the electronic computer was first put to work in the accounting departments of large corporations. It was expensive, complex and unfamiliar. Since then technological advance has been rapid and consistent. Computing now accounts for more than half the capital investment made by US firms. Yet a stable model for the integration of information processing technology into business has never been established. The accepted name of the department responsible for computing has changed several times, as has its mission and its place in the organizational chart. General dissatisfaction with current operations has been cultivated to sell new visions and new technologies. Spectacular growth has thus coexisted bizarrely with constant disappointment.

My story is about the use of failure as a cultural resource, mobilized by different expert professions within corporate world. It is hard to find a paper written for a specialist or managerial audience about typical computer experience in corporate management that does not paint a picture of failed systems, massive inefficiencies and missed opportunities. This was established as the dominant narrative mode within a few years of the first computer use by business. Data processing managers, accountants, consultants, systems analysts, computer manufacturers, management information system enthusiasts and other experts of different stripes all started their papers with identical descriptions of widespread failure - even as they went on to attribute it to radically different causes and to construct their own expertise as the best solution.

This professional anti-boosterism persisted for decades. Descriptions of the disease changed remarkably little, even as the cures proposed by one expert group or era were enlisted as causes of failure by others. The trope of failure achieved a cultural prominence and longevity within these disparate expert communities in a way that no specific means of addressing it ever could.