

Thomas Haigh thaigh@sas.upenn.edu
The Fix is Information, Now What Was the Problem?

“When complete information is available, the policy or decision may already have been made. Another way to say this is the facts speak for themselves and require only a formal acceptance and stamp of approval by the line executive rather than a decision.” (Article promoting the management information system concept, 1962)

Throughout the twentieth-century, a series of technologies were infused with almost mystical managerial powers. From the humble card file, through the punched card machine and the management information system, to the mighty data warehouse, each in turn was promoted with the claim that it would take the guesswork and subjectivity out of decision making. Each was expected to remove organizational politics and disagreement from the world of management. And each implied that there was no managerial problem that could not be fixed with a better supply of facts (or, as they were known from the late-1950s onward, information).

These fixes were both technological and technocratic; their support within the social world of the corporation came primarily from the latter attribute. They figured in a long-running struggle between the entrenched power of accounting and financial staff – whose steadily rising status within the corporation was built upon a monopoly of financial control information – and a succession of challengers armed with a new language systems and machines. The latter included the office managers of the 1920s, the systems men of the 1960s and chief information officers of the 1980s (with considerable continuity between groups). Each role was spread through a social movement intended to turn expertise in the technologies and techniques of administration into a claim to independent managerial authority. Each tried to recast management itself as a new realm of technical expertise, thereby greatly increasing the power as creators of standards and systems held by members of functional staff management groups.

My paper explores the startling and previously undocumented continuities between these episodes of technological utopianism. Its particular focus is on the role of these technical fixes as the focal points of new communities, spanning both organizational boundaries and existing occupational loyalties. These new groupings brought the engineering and marketing staff of the fix-producing firms together with specialists within the firms using them – specialists whose loyalties and skills were more closely tied to these technologies than to the employers for whom they worked, or even the industries in which they were employed. Consultants often played key roles in promoting and installing these fixes, as did the faculty of business schools.

I have previously presented and published on several of the individual parts of this story. My presentation here will be the first to focus on the overall picture. It will combine analytical discussion of the ongoing similarities and distinguishing features of the different fixes with liberal use of quotes and images to invoke the specifics of each era. With its focus on experts, systems, and technical claims to social authority, my paper begins to open up connections between the social history of corporate management and these key themes of twentieth century American history.

“... Acme visible records force their owners to use the facts - profit by them, save money by them, stop losses before they get started.... Its successful operation in your business will be automatic...” (Advertisement for Acme file cards, 1932)