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New Technologies, Old Problems: Historical Amnesia and Enterprise Computing
by Thomas Haigh, Ph.D

Colby College and University of Pennsylvania

Date	Monday, December 2, 2002
Time	1:30 p.m. — 2:30 p.m.
Place	Walnut Room, Indiana Memorial Union

Abstract

During the 1990s, America's corporate leaders embraced information technology as the basis of a fundamental transformation and decisive break with the past. Today, however, most firms report disappointment with the results and are increasingly wary of grand projects.

A variety of initiatives were widely attempted. Consultants had promised to "reengineer" business processes around the new possibilities of technology, to "deconstruct" the value chain and to "de-layer" the organization chart. Firms launched massive programs to integrate their operational computer systems (via enterprise resources planning systems) and to build structured information repositories for decision making (data warehouses).

Yet, unknown to most of those involved, all of these ideas had been widely discussed (and in most cases widely attempted) decades earlier. Internet technologies seemed to defy historical precedent, but in fact the organizational and managerial problems afflicting enterprise computing in recent years have changed little from those of earlier decades.

In this talk I examine the forgotten ancestors of these initiatives, document the fundamental problems faced by each, and ponder the lessons to be drawn.

Biography

Thomas Haigh recently defended his Ph.D. thesis in the History and Sociology of Science at the University of Pennsylvania. His dissertation, "Technology, Information and Power: Managerial Technicians in Corporate America, 1917-2000" is the first

overall history of the administrative use of information technology in the 20th Century American corporation.

It integrates the organizational, professional, technological and ideological aspects of this complex story, from the office managers and file cards of the 1910s to the chief information officers and Internet servers of today.

His publications include "Inventing Information Systems: The Systems Men and the Computer" in Business History Review, and "The Chromium-Plated Tabulator: Institutionalizing an Electronic Revolution" in the IEEE Annals of the History of Computing. His awards include a Fulbright, the Tomash fellowship of the Charles Babbage Institute, the Life Member fellowship of the IEEE History Center, and Penn's William Penn fellowship.

He has taught courses on organizational informatics, social informatics, business management, database design and science fiction at Penn, Drexel, and Colby College.

He holds two degrees in systems integration from the computer science department of the University of Manchester, and has worked as a computer consultant specializing in database design. His homepage is www.tomandmaria.com/tom.

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