Automating the Social Work Office: Science Fictions and Practical Realities

Roger A. Lohmann
West Virginia University, roger.lohmann@mail.wvu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/faculty_publications

Part of the Nonprofit Administration and Management Commons, Social Welfare Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Digital Commons Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Research Repository @ WVU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of The Research Repository @ WVU. For more information, please contact ian.harmon@mail.wvu.edu.
Automating the Social Work Office: Science Fictions and Practical Realities

Roger A. Lohmann, Ph.D.
West Virginia University

Abstract

Social work was not originally an office-based profession but has become so in the past few decades. In the process, the information technology of social work practice has changed relatively little. Social work practice has yet to develop unique computer applications, comparable to developments in medicine, law, architecture, education and other fields. Most interest in computer applications in social work to date has been clerical and made use of off-the-shelf applications. The potential of currently available technology for office automation in social work offers the prospect not only for important productivity improvement, but also for a means to dealing with unmet needs and for humanizing the environment of the social work office. Realizing such gains, however, will require new forms of organizational coordination.

Introduction

Social work was not in any of its multiple points of origin an office-based profession. The "friendly visitors" of the charity organization society were more inclined to home visits than to clients visiting them in the office.

---

1 Presented at Council on the Annual Program Meeting of the Social Work Education. Miami FL. March, 1986. Observations in this paper are based in part on the author's experiences as a member of the West Virginia Office Automation Task Force, the West Virginia University Academic Computing Advisory Committee, and the West Virginia Network for Educational Telecomputing (WVNET) and as "lead user" in a medium-sized school of social work.
Settlement workers were more likely to be found in classrooms, community meeting halls, sewing rooms, or kitchens than in any office, as such. School social work began with visiting teachers who worked in the homes of "shut-in" children and medical social work began on the wards of public hospitals.

However, in the early decades of the twentieth century, factors internal and external to the profession converged to create the "social agency" with its underlying office culture. The "medical model" brought the necessity of private treatment rooms. The demands of accountability and aspiring professionalism converged in the necessity for documented case records and integrated filing systems; and an emphasis on supervision and coordination brought the need for co-located offices. Further, rule-bound, policy-based bureaucratization of professional practice was a direct consequence of both the growing standardization of practice method and the demands of public funding.

As a result, since the 1930's social work has been predominantly an office-based profession, and social work practice today suffers from most of the problems of office organization experienced in the business corporation or the government office. Like other office-based professions, social workers make forays into the outside world but, in general, information about the world comes to the social worker via a broad range of information media particularly the telephone and is processed and stored in the office environment.

Relatively few unique information processing conditions or requirements of social work offices have been identified. Contemporary social work typically occurs within generally recognized office space that is not markedly different from similar space employed by other commercial or nonprofit service establishments, and social work practice relies upon generally available office equipment and supplies. Thus, it is quite possible to precisely identify the basic office requirements of the typical social agency. That is what occurs, for example, in setting up new programs and in spelling out minimal requirements for students in field placement. Further, because of the reliance on standard, widely available components, the social work office is relatively easy and inexpensive to set up. This is in marked contrast to a
A dental office, for example, which has a heavy reliance on specialized and expensive equipment and supplies.

One way to view the social work office is as a locus of information flow in a community. In general terms, the social work office is the intersection of two independent information streams: the needs stream is the flow of information from individuals, families and small groups about the personal troubles and social problems of those in need. Interviews, referrals, inquiries and case records are all part of this stream. Within the social work office, the needs stream intersects with the resources stream, which is the flow of information about self-help groups, services, equipment, prostheses and all manner of other problem-solving resources. Information processing in social work is primarily a process of matching elements of the needs-information stream with appropriate elements in the resources-information stream. (See Figure 1)

Information processing in social work practice began as "paper and pencil" technology. Indeed, the image of the social worker with her clipboard and pad is still something of a stock caricature in American folklore and real social work has evolved only slightly in its typical, or modal, information processing capability. Telephones, electrical typewriters, dictation equipment, the copy machine and in some agencies, videotaping equipment have been the principal technological advances in the social work office since its beginnings.

In the past decade, the topic of office automation has received considerable attention in management literature and in specialized publications such as Office Administration and Automation and Government Data. For our purposes, office automation can be defined as the process of introducing machines (hardware), and associated information technology (or software) into the office environment. Of necessity, much of the new office technology is built upon, or integrated with digital computers.

The usual grounds for office automation are said to be improvement of worker productivity and increased efficiency. In the 20th century, gains in manufacturing productivity have far outstripped improvements in service productivity, and most authorities see office automation as a step toward addressing the difference. An additional strong case for office automation, of much potential interest to social work, is its possible impact upon the humanization of office work environments.
Because of the standard character of the social work office, most general office automation advances can be quickly and easily integrated into the clerical functions of the contemporary social work office. As a result, contemporary social work office practice is currently undergoing a period of rapid change as fundamental as any in its history. Typewriters are giving way to word processors, even in the smallest and most rural social work offices. Cloth bound journals and ledgers are gradually being automated into computer-based accounting systems. Electronic spreadsheets are replacing the handwritten kind in preparation of budgets; and address lists, resource directories and other routine types of records are slowly migrating from file cabinets to computerized data base management systems.

Such innovations will require at least some adaptation to the unique aspects of the social work office environment. To the present, local area networks in general offices are organized on a work-group basis within existing organizations. In many community-based social services, organizing such networks along interorganizational "coordination units" of workers concerned with common client populations may make at least as much sense.

A Pattern of Gradual Adoption

The staggering potential of the new technology must be contrasted, however, with the leisurely pace of automation of the social work office. There are two particularly noteworthy features of this gradual adoption of new office technology in the social work office: First, public and nonprofit organizations cannot "write off" the costs of new equipment as a cost of doing business but must finance such purchases either by securing new funds or diverting funds already budgeted for other purposes. As a result, introduction of word processors, personal computers and other office automation equipment in the typical social agency lags behind usage in otherwise comparable commercial offices and is likely to continue to do so.

Secondly, unlike medicine, law, architecture, and education, the impact of contemporary trends in office automation in the social work office has been almost exclusively limited to the "outer office" and to clerical support functions. The impact of office automation upon the actual practice of social work has been virtually nil.
There is presently nothing in social work comparable to the on-line National Library of Medicine, the various Problem-Oriented Medical Record experiments, or "expert systems" capable of sophisticated diagnoses of certain diseases by computer (Walker, Hurst and Woody, 1973, Weed, 1969). A few social agencies have reportedly been experimenting with problem-oriented case records. However, such practices are certainly not yet typical or ordinary for social agencies.

Nor is there anything quite like the impressive and growing systems of computerized reviews, briefs, precedents and summaries developing in law. Likewise, there is nothing in social work like the integrated systems of appointment calendars, accounting information and billing generators available for doctors, dentists, lawyers and others, although many such commercially available systems could readily be adapted for use in social work offices. Further, social work not yet evolved any software or hardware comparable to the many test construction, tutorial, and test scoring, hardware and software presently available to support teaching activity. (See, for example, issues of Technological Horizons in Education (THE) Journal). Nor is there anything comparable to the kind of computer-aided design (CAD) equipment which is virtually revolutionizing the nature of day-to-day work in architectural offices.

**Next Steps**

There continues to be an unfortunate and misguided perception among social workers that computers are primarily "number crunching" devices of principal interest to the engineer and statistician and petty tyrants interested in dehumanization. In reality, computers are primarily symbol manipulators and social work is primarily a symbolic communications process. The challenge still facing the field is to find the most appropriate means of utilizing the new technology to facilitate social work practice and not merely to provide the necessary supportive services in the office.

At the same time, office automation must be seen as a topic far broader than simply the isolated introduction of personal computers and other hardware and software into the social work office. Indeed, once the level of
technology beyond memory typewriters is breeched, seemingly isolated issues quickly reveal surprising and sometimes bizarre connections.

In the automated office typewriter, telephone and videotape equipment are no longer isolated, stand alone pieces of equipment, but parts of a common information system. Even elementary data base management software inevitably raises very thorny issues of records management and storage policies long neglected in most agencies. Once a computerized file of records is recognized for the "data system" that it is, how can its noncomputerized equivalents in file drawers ever be successfully ignored again?

Further, mundane questions of operator fatigue and whether or not computer screens give off damaging rays are thin entering wedges into the whole arena of office ergonomics, and an unprecedented new route to issues of employee welfare. Once the insights of this new field, which merges engineering to the traditional concerns of human relations, are let loose, how can further insights into the impact of fluorescent lighting, smoke and other ambient air pollutants, and chair positioning on noncomputer users be ignored?

Thus, properly understood, the topic of computer use in the social service agency also opens up to consideration the full spectrum of traditional practices, received ways of doing things, and standard operating procedures of the social work office. Such a focus on the human capabilities, limitations and requirements of workers may be very timely in the present era, when a major share of the burdens of funding cutbacks have been imposed on workers in social work offices in the form of gradually deteriorating working conditions.

Value Considerations

We should not be concerned only with introducing our students to computer literacy in order to enable them to do the same old things more quickly, or with isolated questions of which word processor or computer to buy, or how to use particular software packages, nor even merely with the substantive questions of the design and improvement of information systems as abstractions. Social work must become engaged with the whole range of broad issues of office automation as they affect the social work office; that is,
with the appropriate human use of mechanical and electronic devices as substitutes for unaided human effort in the practice of social work.

Several important value considerations should be utmost in this consideration of office automation topic.

First, current and future efforts to utilize available office technology for supportive clerical work should be guided by predominant social work value and ethical considerations. Above all, such technology should be utilized to contribute to overall humanization of the workplace for both clients and workers. We may need to look more closely at general working conditions in our agencies. From the standpoint of lighting and ambient air pollutants such as paper lint alone, the typical social work office today is basically an ergonomic cesspool. Social work offices are probably no worse in this regard than many other offices. That hardly constitutes a "good housekeeping seal of approval", however.

We also need to maintain a healthy skepticism toward large integrated caches of client information. Nearly two decades of experience with "Management Information Systems" in social agencies have failed to demonstrate any conclusive or definitive improvements in either practice or management control, while frequently only generating reams of unnecessary and poorly controlled information. Adequate procedural safeguards are still lacking in many areas. For example, a survey of child abuse registries found that one third of those surveyed had no procedure for expunging data when an allegation of abuse was determined to be unfounded and there was a general lack of consensus on appropriate bases for procedural protections. (Gibelman and Grant, 1978) Except in the prompt dispatching of large numbers of social security and public assistance checks, the record of large-scale, mainframe computer systems in the social welfare arena is anything but clear-cut.

Secondly, efforts to improve the position and further the interests of clients, and not concerns for social control or efficiency, should be the primary focus of efforts to extend automation of the social work office beyond the clerical and into the professional arena. Most office automation today is touted on grounds of productivity improvement, and where carefully implemented such gains can indeed be truly impressive. Equally impressive, however, could be the improvements in client access to needed information,
improved assurances of client rights, and other, associated furthering of the interests of clients. In the social work office, these should be the fundamental concerns.

A central component of any discussion of office automation is the difficult issue of the potential short and long-term impacts upon social work employment. Indeed, the specter that computers might someday replace social workers has been a concern of some in the field at least since the Rogerian therapist program called Eliza was first released by Artificial Intelligence programmers in the 1960's. Such concerns have often been behind a kind of modern day Ludditism with some workers. In a budget-cutting era like the present, such concerns cannot be entirely discarded.

In general, however, concern for massive disruptions in social work employment due to computer-enhanced productivity improvements needs to be balanced against the chronic shortages of professionally trained manpower in social work relative to social need. These shortages are likely to be exacerbated as the "grandfathering" clauses on recently enacted licensure bills diminish in impact, and we again come up against the reality of negative entry ratios (in which fewer professionally trained new workers are graduated each year than are lost to the field through retirement and career shifts.)

A related consideration is the growing extent of "unmet need" among groups such as the elderly, chronic mentally ill, homeless, and others due to budget cuts. Recent studies by the Department of Labor, for example, project geriatric social work as one of the fastest growing occupations of the next 15 years. Under such labor market conditions, one highly plausible alternative to automation-based unemployment would be rationalization of the system, as professional effort freed up by office automation could be reallocated to previously unmet needs.

Productivity improvements which doubled or tripled the effective output of the average social worker could easily be accommodated without serious threats to presently employed professional social workers, provided only that professional efforts freed up by automation could be rechanneled into existing unmet needs. The risk, however, is that in the current political climate of "accountability", simple expenditure reduction and not productivity improvement is the real objective.
Implications for Social Work

What are the implications of office automation for social work education?

First, we need to adopt a more vigorous educational strategy to assist existing agencies in making full use of existing office technology to humanize the workplace and improve client functioning, whether in the form of word processing, accounting, spreadsheet, or data base management software, or in more subtle and esoteric areas such as ergonomic findings on the impact of chair and table design on lower back problems, or the impact of improper lighting on stress.

Most social workers today have only a very limited grasp of the potentials of office technology to further the humanistic ends of social work, and the current emphasis on "number crunching" and "computer literacy" courses for MSW students will not be sufficient to overcome these deficits. There are a number of practical steps which would further the cause of office automation in the professional as well as the clerical arena.

One appropriate step would be the creation of a national task force of educators and practitioners to examine existing research and gather information on current practices in the interrelated areas of office automation and ergonomics with an eye toward the value considerations already mentioned. Ideally, such a project should be a joint undertaking of CSWE and NASW. Ideally, such a group might provide the auspices for additional proposals like those mentioned below.

One of the most serious limitations of the current approach to office automation in social work is its organization-bound, "vertical" nature. If a local area network is created, it is limited to the work group of a particular office or agency. If a national service delivery system, like Public Assistance, the Aging Network or United Way introduces an innovation, it is likely to be strictly within fixed organizational parameters. (E.g., GOSS, SCAN, and UWASIS).

However, many of the most vexing and difficult aspects of social work practice involve "horizontal" between-systems and interorganizational domains. At the community level, united ways, planning councils, agency forums, neighborhood associations and other vehicles of coordination should begin addressing more systematically multi-office, interorganizational work
groups and ways to create and sustain electronic supports for such groups. The information dimensions of everyday relationships surrounding educational field instruction offer another area for development of horizontal information linkages. At the national level, only CSWE and NASW have the kind of scope to undertake truly coordinated national projects of this kind for social work as a whole.

Second, groups of social work educators should immediately begin exploiting more vigorously the technical possibilities which already exist, and which are currently emerging. The technology is already in place through BITNET, CUSSNET and other electronic networks, for example, for joint-site, "cluster-sample" national studies in which researchers from different campuses collaborate actively in the same research project, using the electronic mail capabilities of the networks. Electronic mail of the BITNET type requires only a terminal or PC with communications software and modem, can be learned in an hour or two, and requires only minimal abilities to read and type in order to use fully. Indeed, breaking through the maze of disinformation and obfuscation surrounding most university computing centers today is likely to be a far more formidable task than learning to mail and receive documents.

Existing technology would also support at minimal cost PC-based local public "bulletin boards" with information about agency admissions requirements, office schedules, policy requirements, referral and payment procedures and other similar information available to callers equipped with only a PC and phone modem and the phone number of the bulletin board.

The extension of such agency "bulletin boards" to community-wide electronic information and referral services is conceptually straightforward: Imagine, for example, a world of practice in which instead of having to play "telephone tag" with a worker in another agency, a social worker could with one keystroke have her PC "autodial" a public bulletin board at another agency to obtain a list of their intake criteria, sliding fee scales, or other pertinent information. Or, imagine an automated policy manual on line in which "agency workers", "clients" and "workers in other agencies" could have access to different, relevant aspects of the same policy.

If the recent past is any indication, testing of these ideas in an educational milieu and their subsequent introduction into the practice
community is a plausible scenario. As educators, however, we are not just concerned about improvements "out there" in the social work office, but in the "office culture" of higher education as well. Some aspects of the educational process are unique and do not lend themselves to modeling for practice.

Conclusion

Social work practice grew up in the milieu of early twentieth century office technology, and those paper and pencil origins still define, to a remarkable degree, the parameters of existing information processing technology in social work practice. A number of opportunities exist, at present, for using already existing technology to improve upon existing ways of doing things. Some of these office automation technologies can be implemented on an organization-by-organization basis, but others will require planned and coordinated national strategies. Consequently, the national social work community needs to begin to address seriously some of the fundamental issues and questions involved.

References


Weed, L.L. *Medical Records, Medical Education and Patient Care: The Problem-Oriented Medical Record*. Case Western Reserve Press: Cleveland. 1969.