In the preface to *The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information*, media historian Craig Robertson positions his book within a tradition of sociocultural studies of office information and communication technologies that has in JoAnne Yates and Cornelia Vismann two of its major representatives.[1] Robertson’s focus is narrower than Yates’s and less abstract than Vismann’s. He is interested in one particular kind of office equipment—the filing cabinet—and by examining its material components (such as metal drawers, manila folders, and tabs) and organizing principles (i.e., verticality, integrity, and temporality), he reveals the essence of corporate capitalism as it emerged in North America at the turn of the twentieth century.

The book’s main argument is that the filing cabinet, whose structure and set of embedded values had been shaped by the primary goal of efficiency, supported the development of new economic ideas, new power dynamics of gender and labor, and new ways of conceiving space and time. Furthermore, the “cabinet logic,” with its physical partitions and its systematic, granular classification of stored objects, contributed to the rise of a new understanding of information as something discrete and particular, that could be easily located, extracted, and manipulated (p. 25). In other words, the “coming to power of information” that would evolve into today’s “information society” has its roots in the efficiency credo that permeated the early twentieth-century business imagination, and of which the filing cabinet is a perfect symbol (p. 6).

Each of the book’s seven chapters attends to different aspects of one key concept, that is, “storage is not neutral” (p. 63). The history of nineteenth-century storage technologies—from box files, desk drawers, and pigeonholes to loose-leaf ledgers, bound books, and finally, the vertical filing cabinet, which was invented in the United States in the 1890s—shows a growing concern for the physical and intellectual integrity of the stored evidence of business activities, also known as records. Steel filing cabinets, built like skyscrapers, combined with standardized classification and indexing practices, appeared to offer the best possible protection for trustworthy information.

In addition to integrity, Robertson emphasizes easy access and rapid retrieval as important features of a “machine,” the filing cabinet, that was meant to facilitate clerical work and make the bureaucrat save time (p. 135). Thanks to a system of visible folder tabs and guide cards that indexed the papers stored in the cabinet drawers accurately, instantaneously, and granularly, the filing cabinet transformed working with information into an almost automatic and brainless activity.
The memory or brain was located in the system, and filing as “information labor” became something different from “knowledge work” (p. 176).

“As the filing cabinet mechanized remembering, so the typewriter mechanized writing” (p. 177). This parallel introduces gender as “a formative category in the organization of the office,” together with “class, race, age, and sexuality,” as both filing and typing were performed almost exclusively by young middle-class white women in the twentieth century’s modern office (p. 195). The book contains dozens of images from historical postcards, brochures, catalogs, and other published materials used to promote specific brands of filing cabinets, as well as filing as a profession, which all portray women, or their disembodied hands, in the act of operating this new office equipment. Women’s information labor in the office was similar to the work they did at home; that is, it was aimed at assisting men so that they could do the more lucrative thinking, or knowledge work.

Robertson’s discussion of the “ideal file clerk” not only sheds light on how information labor came to be seen as a “gendering practice—to perform information labor is to do a woman’s work”; it also explains how the “idea that filing involved nothing more than putting papers away and retrieving them on demand” became dominant (pp. 176, 218). This idea, I would add, is still with us, as shown by the low professional standing of most records managers and archivists in contemporary organizations.

Promoted as a system for efficient bureaucratic paperwork, the filing cabinet became a ubiquitous storage technology, increasingly appearing even beyond the office, as Robertson suggests in the last chapter of his book, where he discusses mid-twentieth century American middle-class home furnishings. In particular, cabinet logic influenced the design of closets and kitchen cabinets, thus reinforcing the idea of a “gendered conception of efficiency” (p. 249).

In his well-organized book, Robertson deconstructs and situates the filing cabinet in its historical contexts of use, with the support of a rich apparatus of beautiful images. The latter help the reader not to feel overwhelmed by the sometimes very detailed descriptions of the functioning of a storage technology that no longer populates our office spaces—whether physical or virtual. Although scientific management and the logic of bureaucracy as described by Max Weber in *Economy and Society* (1978) have given way to more flexible and less hierarchical forms of information management, and powerful search engines have replaced file cabinet icons on computer screens and further simplified and accelerated retrieval, the capitalist exploitation of information as data, the efficiency paradigm, and various forms of inequality in information labor still characterize our relationship to information. It is therefore important to investigate the time when “granular certainty” emerged, and the material objects and hands that shaped this concept, as Robertson admirably does in this book.

Note

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