

Clerical Training

Responding to a Workplace Revolution

by Alice de Wolff

L'auteure discute de l'impact de la restructuration et de la mondialisation de l'économie sur les postes de secrétaires à Toronto et offre des suggestions pour

Even in this economy, over one-third (35 per cent) of clerical jobs have been lost since the boom in 1989. That is, 92,600 clerical, mostly female, jobs have been lost—by far the largest job loss experienced by any occupational group in the region.

répondre à leurs besoins de formation dans ce métier.

Our popular understanding of who has been most affected by the economic restructuring and trade agreements of the 1990s has tended to focus on workers in the fisheries, in manufacturing, in the public sector, and/or on the elimination of "middle managers." Clerical workers are rarely included in that list. Daily we encounter advertising for new office technologies and excitement about the "information economy." Yet clerical workers are rarely recognized as the front line workers in this new economy. They are of course mostly women, mostly unorganized, and they continue to be remarkably invisible. Their lives and work have been profoundly affected by economic restructuring and the new tools of the information economy—perhaps more profoundly, and certainly in more numbers, than any other occupational group.

A focus on this occupation provides us with a picture of the pressures affecting one in four women in the paid workforce. Clerical work is still a "pink ghetto": 76.5 per cent of Ontario clerical workers were women in 1991. In 1994, 26 per cent of women in the Ontario workforce

were clerical workers (Statistics Canada 1991). This article reports on the findings of several groups who have monitored and organized around clerical employment and training in Metro Toronto over the past three years. Two comprehensive studies of the occupation resulted in the successful establishment of the Clerical Workers Centre, a counselling and referral service in the fall of 1997

(see de Wolff; Bird and de Wolff). The results of the two studies have specific implications for meeting the new needs clerical workers have for training and education.

Toronto has been a crucial location for this kind of initiative because the clerical labour force is still the largest non-managerial, non-professional occupational group in its economy. Toronto is the home of many head offices, and is the regional and national centre of the financial services industries, all of which are dependent on a large numbers of clerical workers. However, even in this economy, over one-third (35 per cent) of clerical jobs have been lost since the boom in 1989. That is, 92,600 clerical, mostly female, jobs have been lost—by far the largest job loss experienced by any occupational group in the region. By way of comparison, 22,700 managerial jobs were lost between 1989 and 1997, but the proportion of managers in the labour market has *increased* from 16.5 per cent to 17.5 per cent. In the same period 17,300 product manufacturing jobs were lost, and the proportion of those jobs in the labour market also increased, from 9.3 per cent to 9.5 per cent (Statistics Canada 1997).

The large loss of clerical jobs was anticipated during the 1980s by peo-

ple who were analyzing technological change (see Menzies), but it didn't take place. Two events have made it the reality of the 1990s: the corporate levelling, lean staff restructuring strategies that were adopted during the recession and have hung on since; combined with the lower costs and increased reliability and accessibility of computer network technologies. In the past seven years these two events have contributed to a re-engineering of office support work that is similar to that experienced by manufacturing workers in the 1980s.

Our studies indicate that clerical work is changing in the following ways. In most cases, the work has intensified. Institutional restructuring over the last decade has meant that there are fewer support staff in most offices, and that they are handling an increased workload. At the same time, the organization of the work is increasingly "flexible," more clerical workers are part-time, part-year, or temporary employees. Most clerical workers are also employed in small and medium-sized workplaces, where the intensification and "multi-tasking" of jobs is most pronounced.

Second, the work is often more complex. Clerical workers are handling an increased range of tasks, including a broader range of clerical duties plus more non-clerical tasks which are often entry level professional work. We found clerical workers doing portions of a wide range of professional jobs including counselling, selecting manuscripts for publishing, editing, training, computer-assisted electrical engineering design, and computer network maintenance. Many customer service jobs are being re-organized into call centers where workers are expected to handle a wider range of billing questions, sales, and service.

Clerical work is more obviously information processing. Clerical workers are front line information

workers. The newer office software packages make it possible for clerical staff to treat all office information as data, and to mobilize that data in a number of different forms.

Work processes and divisions of labour within offices have also changed. Text entry has migrated to professionals and managers, while clerical staff now handle higher-end text processing, presentation, and production software and procedures.

who do not have strong spoken English or French will find it much more difficult to enter the occupation.

Critical features of the clerical labour market have also changed. It is an employer's market, and is very competitive. The large scale of job loss has meant that many women clerical workers have experienced longer-term unemployment and more are receiving long-term social assistance. Older women tend to have

the most difficulty learning the new skills required, and in making a transition to a new job if they have been laid off. Those who have jobs stay in them longer and make accommo-

dations, like working longer hours, increasing workloads, or putting up with levels of harassment that would have been unthinkable ten years ago. The stresses of being displaced, and of staying employed in intensified jobs have been substantial (de Wolff). The studies found that there is very little mobility within companies. The restructuring of the early 1990s has "frozen" movement. There are fewer clerical and managerial jobs, and flat, broad-banded classification systems which reduce horizontal movement. In the 1980s a significant number of clerical workers moved into lower-level managerial positions, but many of these positions have been eliminated (de Wolff).

There are smaller numbers of entry level positions, or positions which require no previous experience, and there is continued restructuring and outsourcing by larger employers. The office support work that is outsourced includes mail room services, photocopying and printing, accounts receivable and payable, and all human resources services including payroll accounting.

As a result, there is loss of unionized jobs in both public and private sector downsizing. For many women, unionized clerical jobs have been among the best jobs available, with

generally higher salaries and benefits, family-related leaves, and protections around substantial job change. Union victories around maternity leave, family leaves, training, etc., have created a standard for other workplaces. The loss of unionized jobs means that fewer women have these protections, and that working women as a whole lose a strong force for creating workplace change.

Employers provide minimal training, expecting employees to be work-ready and many employers require industry-specific, or equipment-specific experience. These requirements create industry-specific labour markets. Some employers now expect, but don't require higher levels of education. Employers' formal requirements for education background do not appear to have risen, but the education background of a significant number of clerical workers is considerably higher than the formal requirements of their jobs.¹ That is, under-employed people from other occupational groups are holding clerical jobs. Consequently career clerical workers who tend to have lower levels of education find it hard to compete.

Many clerical workers who had permanent employment in the late 1980s have been displaced into a growing contingent, or temporary workforce, into lower-paid personal service sector jobs. "Non-standard" jobs have fewer protections, usually lower salaries, fewer benefits, and often disruptive, ever-changing schedules. Many employers suggest this kind of work is good for women because it allows them the flexibility to handle their family responsibilities, and for some women this is true. But for many it means that they need two or more jobs to survive, that their employment is not stable, and that they have to juggle impossible schedules.

Job losses and restructuring of the work itself has by no means ended. The rather questionable restructuring strategy that moves clerical support work into managerial and professional jobs continues to be adopted by institutions which are downsizing. The round of corporate downsizing

Older women have the most difficulty learning the new skills required, and in making a transition to a new job. Those who have jobs make accommodations, like working longer hours, increasing workloads, or putting up with levels of harassment unthinkable ten years ago.

Some technological support is now handled by clerical staff and some computerized entry level professional work has also migrated to clerical staff. For instance, insurance clerical staff handle all but the cheque approval parts of insurance claims adjusters work; and some accounting clerks handle all accounts up to and including audit preparation. Some data entry, ordering, and updating has migrated to customers/clients, while some of the technical training of other clerical staff and professionals/managers is done by support staff. Furthermore, some work has disappeared. Data is entered once and used for longer sequences of related transactions.

Most clerical jobs have an increased customer service focus. That is, there are fewer "back room" jobs where good English communication skills are not a requirement. This places increased pressure on non-English or French-speaking immigrant women. In the past, many have been able to enter the Canadian workforce through data entry and accounting clerical jobs. Now, in order to keep those jobs, many are now being required to learn spoken and written English or French and are receiving very little support to make this transition. Current and future immigrants

that took place in the early 1990s has slowed but this province has not yet felt the impact of the large provincial cuts that have already been announced. Further cuts are coming in education and in municipal governments. Many of the jobs that will be cut, that are considered "fat," are clerical. The next generations of technological change, like the increased reliability of voice recognition technologies and lower-cost optical imaging hardware will enable further downsizing and re-engineering.

If the overall occupational displacement is to lead individuals into positions other than lower-paying jobs in the personal services sector, new career paths must be actively mapped, developed and supported. This is an effort that can not be successfully managed by any one labour market "partner." Employers, unions, trainers, counsellors, governments, and individual clerical workers must all be involved.

A road map for training and education

Our studies have identified possible progressions and connections to other occupations and careers. The introduction of entry level professional tasks in many clerical jobs suggests new opportunities. The progression from accounting clerk to accountant is one example; another is the movement from production clerk into production design and technology; still another is progression from payroll clerk into human resources management. The observation that new career paths must be developed led Toronto activists to a central critique of the existing clerical training and education. There is no coordination among the public, private, and community-based institutions involved. Consequently accreditation for clerical training is not transferable: it is not developmental, does not accumulate, and does not assist individuals in progressing either through clerical occupations or into other occupational areas.

There is a systematic mismatch

between existing training, the rapid decrease in size and increased complexity of this occupation, and the education of individuals in the occupation. The education and training that individuals need to enter the field, to maintain their current level within the occupation, and to progress through it is more demanding than in the past. Yet there is less training available: workplace training has significantly decreased in the past ten years (see Betcherman *et al.*) and publicly funded programs have closed or are in jeopardy. Since the early 1900s clerical work has acted as an entry to the workforce for large numbers of high school educated women, but this status is in some transition. Yet government policy and many programs still focus on training new clerical workers for entry level jobs, and have little ability to assist those already in the workplace with anything other than product specific training. Clerical work continues to be the largest source of employment for women who do not have post-secondary education or whose foreign credentials in other occupations are not transferable to Canada. Yet post-secondary education is increasingly needed to maintain many current jobs, and certainly to progress through the occupation rather than be displaced "downward."

The systematic mismatch is ech-

the re-design of their own work.

The Toronto studies have suggested several directions forward for trainers and policy makers. It is important to establish coordination between public, private, and community-based training institutions who work with clerical workers. The goal would be to establish a more coherent, developmental system for clerical training, including consistent use of prior learning assessment and recognition and transferable accreditation. With the formation of a training network, the Clerical Workers Centre is beginning to play this role in Toronto. Trainers need to develop curriculum which reflects the increased responsibilities of clerical workers, provides connections with or strengthens new career paths, and addresses the needs of experienced workers. Trainers are encouraged to adopt the "Best Practices in Training Clerical Workers" found during the 1995 study (de Wolff).

Employers and unions should enable career development through support for career-related diploma and degree courses, as well as the development of internal clerical career paths, while the government supports the healthy transition of the occupation by providing substantial public funding for individual re-training, including college diplomas and university level degrees.

In this region, the Clerical Work-

Clerical work has acted as an entry to the workforce for large numbers of high school educated women, but this status is in some transition. Yet government programs have little ability to assist those already in the workplace with anything other than product-specific training.

oed in the content of the training, particularly for experienced workers. Trainers of this group are usually hired to teach new software applications. They are rarely expected to, nor do they have the time to expand their teaching into information system management and cross software applications, or to help strengthen workers' abilities to take some control over

ers Centre will begin to encourage trainers to explore these routes, and will be lobbying for appropriate and adequate government support for workers in clerical occupations. Because of the tremendous change being experienced by this group, we trust that workers, activists, unions, researchers, and educators in other regions will begin to make visible the

changes that are taking place in your local clerical labour force, and will begin to take action to create a clerical training system.

This is a moment of large and historic challenge for the training and education community. Can we change it quickly enough to effectively assist one in four working women to equip themselves for the revolution in their work?

Alice de Wolff has been an activist in for over 20 years. She is currently a research and policy analyst with a preference for working on issues relating to women's paid employment.

¹For instance, in one bank, all the employees had either a university degree or 15 to 20 years experience, while the formal requirements for the job were high school graduation and experience in a bank (de Wolff). In a credit card call centre, employees were required to speak several language and have high school education, but over half had at least one university degree (Bird and de Wolff).

References

- Betcherman, Gordon, *et al.* *The Canadian Workplace in Transition*. Kingston: Industrial Relations Centre, Queen's University, 1994.
- Bird, P., and A. de Wolff. "Occupation Analysis: Clerical Occupations in Metropolitan Toronto." Toronto: Clerical Workers Centre, 1997.
- de Wolff, Alice. "Job Loss and Entry Level Information Workers: Training and Adjustment Strategies for Clerical Workers in Metro Toronto." Toronto: Metropolitan Toronto Clerical Workers Labour Adjustment Committee, 1995.
- Menzies, Heather. *Women and the Chip*. Ottawa: Labour Market Development Task Force, 1981.
- Statistics Canada. *Labour Market Survey*. Ottawa: 1997.
- Statistics Canada. *Labour Force Annual Averages, 1991-1994*. 71-529. Ottawa: 1991.

JOAN BOND

Checking Out

Ahead of me, man in black in profile
thin head & neck curving into his shoulder
like a coat hanger, he turns in slow motion:
"Do you play the trumpet? Is that your son?"
His wife, in front, flings him a look
of dirty laundry, and leaning towards me, confesses
"It's his medication."
She pays the cashier for toilet paper, washcloths & Vaseline
while he stares past me to the end of the line,
sighs dropping from his foolscap face
like coins into the clerk's palm.
"What's your son's name?"
His wife swivels him forward;
another confession as her shoulder shoves into mine:
"It's hell." They toddle towards the mall;
she carries the bags, he carries her purse
and all his memories inside it.

Joan Bond's poetry appears earlier in this volume.

David Smiley • Photographer

416-203-8599

- Ready for work
- Documentary and Illustration, Portraits and Events
- 20 years on-location work using appropriate lighting
- A passion for social justice

Testimonials

"... Your interest in the day and friendly disposition was un-intrusive.... Thank you for your professionalism...."

—Carolyn Whitzman, Safe City

"... he also brought to these tasks an understanding and creative approach that always enhanced the projects.... I would not hesitate to recommend David...."

—Larry Gordon, Metro Credit Union

"... Mr. Smiley is a very skilled photographer, he is able to assist ... in communicating ... in a most powerful manner."

—Councillor Oliva Chow