No Room for White Space: The Personal Information Management of a Printing Company Employee in a Home Office

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ABSTRACT

In library and information science (LIS) literature, information organization and use within traditional office environments has received much attention, while occurrences of these same phenomena within the intersectional home office space have gone largely unexplored. Similarly, no LIS literature has focused on the dimensions of information organization and use in the printing profession, though the volume of documents and resources necessary for job success in this realm make it an information-rich area, ripe for exploration.

This small-scale research study involved an ethnographic fieldwork outing into the home office of one printing company employee, and was guided by the question of what approaches to information organization and use, conventional or unconventional, arise in this environment. Data was gathered by way of diagrams, photographs, a guided tour, a semi-structured interview, and unobtrusive observation. Data analysis provided a preliminary glimpse into physical (paper-based) information organization and use as these occur within one specific home office context, and a means to begin theorizing about the effects of home office environments on such "meta-level" information activities (Jones, 2007, p. 464). This study will be expanded in an upcoming (2010) thesis that compares similar information practices across a larger sample of home office settings and devices.

1. INTRODUCTION

For forty-eight years, my father has worked in the printing profession. In his current position, he is a "sales representative," acting largely as a liaison between customers (most often publishing firms) and the printing plant facility that he assigns to handle and fulfill their orders for printed materials. He oversees the entire process from initial price quotations for "print runs" through to final, finished products.

Through the metatheoretical lens of ethnography, the aim of this study was to analyze my veteran printing company employee father's home office, a vast and ever-growing assortment of documents relating to his work and "samples" of the various items, mostly books, he takes part in creating. This paper provides a glimpse into the personal information management specific to this context by focusing on the organization and use of the print documents (papers or files) and print resources (books) contained within his office. Although undeniably a major factor in the home office studied, information residing within and exchanged via any technological systems was not included in the scope of this study. Investigation into the physical information phenomena in the home office was guided by the question, "What approaches to information organization and use, conventional or unconventional, arise in this environment?"

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To date, no library and information science (LIS) literature has focused on the information dimensions of the printing profession, or of the commercial information production industry more broadly. Yet, the rapid accumulation and sheer volume of print documents and print resources necessary for job success in this realm situates it on a plane that is comparable to that of academic scholars—professionals who do have a large body of informationuse literature behind them—in information richness.

Similarly, a small but valuable subset of LIS literature speaks directly to the 'real' office environment and to the organization and use of information artifacts therein, while the home office remains an unexplored terrain. The unique nuances of the home as a stand-alone concept have not gone unnoticed by LIS scholars, who recognize that information behaviours do not occur there uncompromised, or simply take on the same shape as they would in another setting. Rieh (2004) notes in her study of personal, at-home, web seeking that "information-use environments" (p. 3) do affect information behaviours, and that "home is considered to be a socially defined setting rather than merely a physical setting" (p. 2). Still, there has yet to be any study of how work-related information behaviours translate to, and transmute within, the home environment.

Both the early writing of Malone (1983) and the later work of Whittaker and Hirschberg (2001) surrounding information management in the general workplace, as present in the dispersal of piles, files, and papers across peoples' "desks,... tables, shelves, file cabinets, and other information repositories" (Malone, 1983, p. 100), underscore Kwasnik's (1991) argument that "situation attributes," or the contexts in which documents are received and required professionally, play key roles in determining their arrangement. Finneran (2007) has also proposed associations between information behaviour and peoples' cognitive and affective motivations to acquire, store, and manage documents. Building from this previous body of literature concerning the personal management of work-related information, the current study theorizes the effects that a quasi-professional, quasisocial home office environment might have on individuals' "metalevel" information activities, or how they "establish, use, and maintain a mapping between information and need" (Jones, 2007, p. 464).

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

In order to carry out this research study, two fieldwork outings into the home office of my father, the printing company employee, were scheduled, one to take place on a vacation day and the other on a typical work day.

The first time accessing the field was used as an opportunity for preliminary data gathering, including mapping, diagramming, and measuring of the overall home office space and its features (all shelving units, filing cabinets, and utilized flat surfaces). A photographic inventory was started, and note taking began. This rough first-round data was enhanced by a tour of the space guided by my father and a semi-structured interview with him later that day, when pertinent labels regarding information organization and prominent patterns of use were marked on the existing diagrams, further field notes were generated, and more photographs were taken. This outing lasted approximately two hours. The second time accessing the field was used as an opportunity for unobtrusive observation; as my father was working that day, I received a 'natural' picture of his information practices for approximately one and a half hours over two sessions.

4. THE FIELD

This study took place in a printing company employee's unheated, nine hundred square-foot suburban basement home office. The space is navigated via narrow paths that wind between looming filing cabinets and teetering six-foot high stacks of books, files, and papers. It is lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that buckle under the weight they hold, illuminated with sporadic DIY lighting, and filled with continuous sounds of keyboard typing and computer printing. Figure 1 illustrates this basement home office space and the extent of the informational spread therein.

To better ground the diagrams in Figure 1 in their reality, Figure 2 provides a photographic overview of one part of the home office within the larger basement (it was captured from alongside the pool table, facing toward the desks). As well, Table 1 gives rough estimates of the number of print artifacts in the home office at the time of this study, indicating an approximate total of 8400 documents and resources, or files, papers, and books (3988.38 books in piles, 1760 books on shelves, and 2652 files in drawers).¹



Figure 1: The basement home office space of a printing company employee, depicted in three images. The first (top left) shows the basement and its features. Those of the household include a pool table (green) and a couch (gold). Those of the home office include bookshelves, desks (all light brown), and filing cabinets (grey). The second image (top right) shows the "red thread" (Bates, 1999, p. 1048) of book samples from the home office as distributed across the basement. The third image (bottom) shows the "red threads" of books and files from the home office as distributed across the basement. (Red squiggles indicate items on shelves or within filing cabinets.)



Figure 2: The printing company employee at work in his home office, amidst overflowing shelves, papers, and piles of books that reach to the ceiling.

Table 1. Estimated Number of Print Artifacts in the Home Office

Books/ pile	Piles	Books/ shelf	Shelves	Files/ drawer	Drawers
60.43	66	32	55	102	26
(423 books/		(128 books/		(306 files/	
7 piles)		4 shelves)		3 drawers)	

This total number, however, is a minimum estimate, as it was difficult to derive the total number of piles with certainty (many were double- and triple-stacked), many shelves were rendered non-visible because of piles, and many flat surfaces were so covered that files thereon simply could not be counted. The total also excludes any files outside of drawers, which Figure 1 indicates there were many.

5. FINDINGS

The remainder of this paper is devoted to describing and analyzing the discoveries made while in the field, which follow from the study's initial research question about the approaches to information organization and use, conventional and unconventional, that arise in this particular home office environment.

Surprisingly, the complex informational spread within the printing company employee's home office is organized according to the comparatively simple principle of "customer": all print documents relating to a single publisher's jobs are kept together in piles, filing cabinet drawers, or entire filing cabinets, and are clearly tabbed with the publisher's name and the related job (book) title. All sample resources of a single publisher are kept clustered together in larger piles, entire piles, on shelves, or on entire shelving units. It was revealed during the interview that this scheme of arrangement was always used for the communal storage units of the 'real' offices in which the printing company employee worked. Because he considers it the easiest system to maintain and the one that best facilitates use, he adopted it himself.



- 1. Bookshelf- McGraw-Hill Ryerson (MHR)
- 2. Bookshelf- Nelson
- 3. Bookshelf- Pearson Education (PE)
- 4. Bookshelf- Random House
- 5. Filing cabinet- various small groupings
- 6. Filing cabinet- Random House
- 7. Filing cabinet- Delmar
- 8. Shelf- various small groupings
- 9. Bookshelf- various small groupings
- 10. Bookshelf- various small groupings
- 11. Bookshelf- various small groupings
- 12. Filing cabinet- Wadsworth, Heinle
- 13. Filing cabinet- "in-production," back orders, and invoices
- 14. Filing cabinet- MHR, PE
- 15. Filing cabinet- PE, Nelson
- 16. Bookshelf- PE, MHR, McClelland & Stewart (MS)
- 17. Bookshelf- MHR, MS

Figure 3: Labeled diagram of the major organization scheme based on "customer," or publisher, in the printing company employee's home office. The major exceptions to this organizational scheme are the printing company employee's placement of "active" (pending) information on or beside his desk, organized by assigned printing plant before customer, and his placement of "recently received," "in-production," and "current month's" information at pivotal points along the route to his desk, where they will inevitably fall into his line of sight as he approaches and passes by them. This seemingly anomalous organization therefore adheres to convention, as the "situation attributes" (Kwasnik, 1991) of these artifacts—being that they were required and referred to more frequently than other print artifacts within the home office at the time of this study—warrant their specialized placement. Also, as Jones (2007) notes, keeping items in view may aid the printing company employee's remembering of the tasks that still require his attention (p. 469).



- 1. Print documents- "active" quotations and corrections
- 2. Print documents- "active" orders
- 3. Print resources- Random House
- 4. Print resources- Random House
- 5. Print documents- "current month's" invoices
- 6. Print resources- Nelson
- 7. Print resources- for disposal
- 8. Print documents- "in-production" orders
- 9. Print documents/resources- "recently received in"
- 10. Print resources- for disposal
- 11. Print resources- for disposal
- 12. Print documents- for disposal

Figure 4: Labeled diagram of the co-existent organization scheme in the printing company employee's home office.

It might be said, then, that in large part, systems of information organization and patterns of information use carry over to the printing company employee's home office as they would have existed in a 'real' office. Still, slight adaptations to the home environment are visible. Information practices in the home office both act on and are acted upon by the 'built' features of the home itself, which are, in this case, quite distinct from those of a typical workplace. Kwasnik (1991) writes that, "a person makes classification decisions within a context and for a purpose, but also within the constraints of physical objects and a physical environment" (p. 397). Because there is no strictly demarcated home office 'zone' within the printing company employee's overall basement space, patterns of organization and use must necessarily account for already existing structures and furnishings, such as decorative wood pillars, immovable islands, couches, and pool tables. Creative, ingenious ways to work around these features according to the needs of the home office must be employed, as demonstrated in Figure 5.

Likewise, information practices in the home office both act on and are acted upon by social relations in the home itself. The halfhousehold basement, half-home office space, due to its hybrid nature, is "a site where the relations within [the] family can be played out and (re)negotiated" (Swan and Taylor, 2005, p. 4). Attempts to recreate 'seamless,' office-like information experiences across systems of organization and patterns of use lead to appropriations of spots formerly designated to household items alone. In turn, household objects end up re-imposed amidst the files and books of the home office so to reinforce prior routine, as shown in Figure 6. Information behaviours in the home office are no longer moderated through professional regulations or colleagues' judgments, as they may be in a 'real' office, but are, in fact, mediated by family members' sometimes vastly different expectations of what constitute acceptable and efficient information practices.





Figure 5: Information organization and use in the home office must incorporate 'built' features of the home itself, and occur within wooden framing, around pool table pockets, and overtop of couches.





Figure 6: Information organization and use in the home office modify based on social relations in the home itself. Everyday household objects such as vegetables (in the green basin) and travel coolers (in the top left picture), and Christmas decorations (on top of the filing cabinets in the top right picture,) are placed amidst home office documents and resources. In the bottom picture, another family member voluntarily takes on the role of 'managing' (shredding) documents that were deemed of no use in the home office.

6. REFLECTIONS

The home office of the printing company employee was set up and continues to evolve in accordance with professional needs and personal preferences, ensuring that it functions for its user like a finely tuned machine. During the observation periods in the home office, for example, the printing company employee never once left his desk chair: all of the information required to carry out his tasks was within arms reach, confirming what he said during the interview about the documents and resources on and surrounding his desk being those that are "not quite ready" to be filed or shelved farther away.

Still, the home office was far from a self-contained entity. Lee's (2003) "structure of users' information spaces" (p. 432) model provided a framework within which the home office was conceptualized in this study (shown in Figure 7). Like the academics Lee (2003) studied, whose information practices occurred mostly within "immediate" offices and occasionally within "adjacent" and "outside" spaces such as libraries, the activities of the printing company employee working from home dissipated outward from an "inner" hub of critical, independent information use to include less frequent, but nonetheless essential, interactions with the broader world.



Figure 7: Model showing the information activities of the printing company employee in the home office, which disperse from a "critical inner office space" of "active" information artifacts, to an "outer office space" of archived and shelved ones, to finally include information interactions with an "outside world." Designations of "inner and outer spaces" and the "outside world" are correspondingly shaded on the diagram of the home office below.

7. CONCLUSION

This research study provides a basis from which to begin theorizing about "meta-level" personal information management activities (Jones, 2007, p. 464) as they occur in the home office space. While the printing company employee's professional concerns surrounding informational content, for example, remain unaltered and suggest an independence from matters of setting, his habits of information organization and patterns of information use have adapted and modified from both necessity and choice.

Building upon this study, future studies (including a thesis in 2010) will examine the degree to which information management practices that may be 'controlled' or constrained in 'real' offices are subject to personal idiosyncrasies in the home office. These will use a wider sample of home office spaces and consider a wider array of information and information devices. Bruce, Jones, and Dumais (2004) write, "effective information seeking and use continues to rest fundamentally with the individual and with his or her ability to create, manage, and use a personal information collection" (Conclusion). The printing company employee's information experience suggests that the home office may be an environment nourishing of diverse personal information management styles, where one is 'free' to act, for example, as an "informal librarian" (Whittaker and Hirschberg, 2001, p. 166), keeping information at their fingertips, or a "sentimental hoarder" (Finneran, 2007, p. 6), attached to the information they acquire.

8. REFERENCES

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