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## Changing status in jobs

Have you ever been working at a computer terminal when it breaks down? What do you do? Perhaps you call the switchboard because this does not happen to you every day.

Very soon a man appears - a technician. There is a slight chance it could be a woman but it is almost always a man. He is wearing a shirt and tie and carrying a case in which he has screwdrivers and pliers. He asks you some questions rather like a doctor asking a patient where it hurts.

You and your terminal are completely in his hands. He carries out the repair and disappears into that mysterious place where technicians live. So where does he fit into the scheme of things? Is he a worker or a manager?

Professor Stephen Barley of Stanford University says in a new paper, *The New World of Work*, published by the British-North American Committee, that we have become conditioned to 'western images of work rooted in several fundamental polarities: mental/manual, clean/dirty, educated/uneducated, white collar/blue collar, manager/worker'.

'The first and last term of each polarity,' he writes, 'anchors the upper and lower end of a system of status and prestige.'

Our images are confused by the computer technician who carries tools like a manual worker but wears a tie like a manager and talks and thinks like the specialist he is.

Is the technician, along with the professional, about to inherit the Earth? If they are, there seems to be little evidence of company managements allowing it to happen. Few managements appear to possess technical expertise in computer systems, yet almost all are making decisions about installing or upgrading computer systems in their businesses. How long can this continue?

Barley argues that the job of technician, traditionally a humble role not highly rewarded, is growing increasingly important across the globe with the expansion of science and technology. He quotes research by the US science historian, Derek J. de Solla Price, into the exponential expansion of scientific knowledge since the 17th century. Price observed that 90 per cent of all scientists who have ever lived are alive today.

Barley is joining those futurologists who believe we are entering a new industrial age which is fundamentally altering the organisation of work. As previous columns have noted, it is a controversial area lacking strong empirical evidence.

Some academics have criticised such predictions, arguing that they are often too influenced by trips to Silicon Valley and anecdotal experience. That said, there can be little argument that computers are having an ever-increasing influence on our lives. The systems which run them are attracting an army of skilled, often self-employed people, whose terms are either negotiated individually or by a sourcing agency.

Jobs such as programmer, systems analyst, operations researcher, computer operator and computer repair technician are among the fastest growing, says Barley, who notes that in north America alone they are expected to provide employment for 2.3m people, or 1.6 per cent of its labour force, by the millennium.

He discusses their impact on managerial and secretarial jobs, suggesting that much management will take on a co-ordinating role between teams of professionals. A study of secretaries at Cornell University found that the spread of personal computers was changing the nature of a secretarial job into that of an administrative or research assistant.

In those circumstances, it may be perceived that the definitions of secretarial and management work are beginning to merge, yet there remains, in most cases, a large gulf between the reward, status and qualifications for the two jobs.

Barley predicts that the technological revolution will produce a more horizontal division of labour, with significant consequences for management. He writes: 'Management's traditional source of legitimacy will begin to wane. Unless managers are technically trained, their claims to be arbiters of technical issues will ring increasingly hollow to employees. Preliminary research suggests that technical workers widely believe executives to be out of touch with the work of the organisations they head.'

Barley adds: 'The likelihood is that managers, unable to make knowledgeable decisions autocratically, will find themselves relegated to the important but less heady role of co-ordination.'

Having said this, he does not deny that managerial hierarchy and technical expertise can work hand in hand, citing the balance achieved by the military.

His observations do not take account of the spread of technical work, particularly of computer data processing, to the emerging nations of Asia. The mobility of much computer work, which can be transmitted in seconds across the world, is bound to have an impact on labour costs, while the ability to skills-source globally will surely remain in the domain of management.

Barley argues, nevertheless, that schools and colleges may need to re-orient the career aspirations of children, upgrading the importance of a technical career.

*The New World of Work is published by British-North American Research Association (UK), Grosvenor Gardens House, 35-37 Grosvenor Gardens, London SW1W 0BS, price £10.*

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