The Office: Integrating Perspectives Across Information Science

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This panel focuses on an information-rich yet under-examined space: the office. Offices are complex crossroads of information structures, information systems, and information seeking behaviors, all shaped by a particular socio-historical context. The panel brings together experts from major specialties of information science (IS) who have conducted research into offices or similar settings. Our goals are threefold:

1.) To introduce “the office” as a useful concept for information research
2.) To examine the office from five different perspectives in the field of IS, namely: history, metatheory, information seeking behavior, classification, and information systems.
3.) To promote cross-specialty conversations among panelists and the audience, leading to better research.

Today, the office is a central concept within work life, family routines, and popular culture. In the U.S. a large percentage of labor occurs in office environments. These spaces range from deluxe corner offices of executive management, to the modest cubicles of entry-level employees. Increasingly, families perform a mix of personal business and entertainment in their home office. The idea of the office transcends physical space. The office metaphor underlies Microsoft’s most popular software suite, invisibly framing our relationship to tasks, technology, and people. The power of the office idea is perhaps revealed in the surprising success of the television program, The Office, which chronicles the happenings of one office community. Though the styles and dimensions of offices vary, all share the feature of enabling information-related activities; hence offices entail artifacts such as documents, files, and folders; information systems; classification schemes; and information behaviors such as seeking, using, saving, and sharing.

While the office is an information-rich and ubiquitous phenomenon of the Information Age, research into the topic from the field of IS has been sporadic over the past three decades, excepting the related specialty of computer supported collaborative work (CSCW). In IS proper there is no consensus on office-related terms and concepts. Such settings have been called personal information environments (Malone, 1983; Kwasnik, 1991), personal space libraries (Miksa, 1996), information spaces (Lee, 2003), or personal information collections (Bruce, Jones, & Dumais, 2004). Office activities have been coined personal documentation (Stibic, 1980), desk organization (Malone, 1983), and personal information management (Whittaker & Hirschberg, 2001; Jones, 2007a, 2007b; Jones & Teevan, 2007). The lack of integration or consensus of these ideas leaves the IS field at a disadvantage in providing leadership and solving problems in the Information Age.

Research into offices in IS has been scattered and non-cumulative because past studies have come from different perspectives of the field. Following disciplinary traditions, investigators have focused on one informational characteristic of offices, which leads to concrete, specialized findings at the necessary expense of an holistic or complete view. For instance, Kwasnik (1989, 1991) studied folk classification systems used by scholars in their offices and within the bounds of that ground-breaking project it was not feasible to simultaneously investigate office information systems, though they are an important related matter. Noting this problem in 2003, Lee reported “a missing link” in the research on information spaces between “users, documents, structures, interactions among the first three, and the environment” (p. 421). In response, this panel will approach the office as an information puzzle with many pieces; we will explore the effect of rallying around a whole mosaic in order to open conversation and integrate research.
Further, the panel will entertain the new metatheoretical perspective that is required to focus on the office. In the recent past, information research has been oriented to frontiers such as the mind (i.e. cognitivism) or the system (i.e. an information-systems perspective), among more than a dozen possible paradigms (Bates, 2005; Talja, Tuominen, & Savolainen, 2005). Most of these conceptual frameworks render physical phenomena, such as a room and its contents, out of view or treat matter as an uncontested background variable. Our panel will address the critical metatheoretical shift required to investigate the material world.

The panelists and their perspectives have been selected to represent major specialties of Information Science; they are listed below in order of appearance:

**Jenna Hartel** (moderator), Faculty of Information, University of Toronto  
Perspective: History  
In a lively, illustrated presentation, Dr. Hartel will define office, describe its key features, and sketch its origins in classical antiquity. Briefly, she will survey research into offices within the field of IS and note relevant scholarship in other disciplines. She will identify the challenges to existing research into offices. Finally, she will introduce the panelists and their perspectives. Dr. Hartel will offer concluding remarks and field Q & As.

**Theresa Anderson**, Senior Lecturer, University of Technology, Sydney  
Perspective: Metatheory  
Dr. Anderson will introduce the sociomaterial perspective (e.g. Anderson, 2007), a metatheory that can enable information researchers to examine both the physical and the social environments that characterize "the office" as a site of study. She will demonstrate the merits of using the sensitizing concept of information life cycle (Harper, 2000; Randall et al., 2005), to trace key information as it makes its way through a site. The life cycle approach involves documents and processes, and rules by which office work is evaluated. Dr. Anderson will engage the audience in the question: Do such sensitizing concepts offer the red thread necessary to examine the dynamic, information rich office environment from an information science perspective?

**Soo Young Rieh**, Assistant Professor, School of Information, University of Michigan  
Perspective: Information Seeking Behavior  
Dr. Rieh will draw from her research into web searching in home environments (Rieh, 2004) and discuss the environmental factors that influence information seeking and use in the home office. Her empirical research has found that home office provides a distinct social context beyond physical setting alone. She will discuss the nature of office settings in which people live, work, and use information.

**Barbara Kwasnik**, Professor, School of Information Studies, Syracuse University  
Perspective: Classification  
Building on her dissertation study (Rutgers, 1989) about the role of context in classificatory decisions within university offices, Dr. Kwasnik will explore the effect of time on the organization of documents in offices. She will discuss factors such as urgency, priority, sequencing, fading, archiving, and timeliness, while taking into account the attributes of form, topic, and purpose. These ideas will apply to both paper and digital documents in office settings.

**William Jones**, Research Associate Professor, The Information School, University of Washington  
Perspective: Information Systems  
Dr. Jones asks: What is the office in an era of “nomadic computing” where f2f collaboration can happen anywhere including a favorite coffee shop and collaboration can extend over time and across great distances via a variety of communication modes ranging from traditional email to blogs, wikis and, even, virtual realities such as Second Life? What is the desktop and desktop computing in an era when our information – potentially all our information – is on the Web synched as needed with a handheld device carried in pocket or purse? Dr. Jones will
explore these questions especially as they relate to our enduring quest to manage, rather than be managed by, our information.

To close, this panel brings together experts from multiple perspectives in the field with something to say about the office. We aim to tackle theoretical issues, examine empirical findings, and demonstrate integrative scholarship. The panelists will make an intentional effort to speak in a general, not specialized, vocabulary; ample time will be provided for audience discussion and participation. Everyone should depart the session with a more complete picture of the important Information Age concept of the office.

References


