The Information Experience of a Printing Company Employee in a Home Office

Leslie Thomson

Leslie Thomson is completing her Master of Information Studies degree at the University of Toronto, concentrating on Library and Information Science, and Archives and Records Management. This article was written as part of her work in Professor Jenna Hartel’s 2009 course “The Information Experience in Context”, and is a precursor to an upcoming 2010 thesis that will expand upon this same subject and explore personal information management across a variety of home office spaces. Leslie also holds an Honours Bachelor of Arts English Specialist degree from the University of Toronto. leslie.thomson@utoronto.ca

Abstract

In library and information science literature (LIS), the organization and use of information 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, none of the literature on LIS or personal information management (PIM) 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 concentrated on information artefacts, information organization and use, and information flow as present 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 beliefs, organization, and use as these phenomena occur within one specific home office context, and a means to begin theorizing about the effects of home office environments on information practices.

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 publishers) 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. Personal proximity to my father and physical proximity to his home office, which has been in existence for approximately ten years, have motivated this research project.

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 he takes part in creating. This paper provides a glimpse into the information experience specific to this context by focusing on the print documents (papers or files) and print resources (books) contained within the office, as well as the organization and use of these information artefacts. Investigation into the nature of information in the home office of a printing company employee was guided by the following research questions: How are different types of information perceived in this environment? What approaches to information organization and use, conventional or unconventional, arise in this environment? Are certain information channels professionally indispensable in this environment?

Though undeniably a major factor in the home office studied, the information residing within and exchanged via any technological system was not included in the scope of this paper; therefore, “information channels” are defined as other available, utilized means of exchanging the physical information artefacts that comprise the main focus of this study, such as mail or parcel delivery services.

Literature Review

To date, no library and information science (LIS) or personal information management (PIM) 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 information-use literature behind them – in information richness.

Likewise, a small but substantial body of LIS literature speaks directly to the ‘real’ office environment and to the organization and
use of information artefacts 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) indeed 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 organization in the general workplace, as present in the dispersal of piles, files, and papers across employees’ “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), drawing from the field of psychology, has also proposed associations between information behaviour and 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, quasi-social home office environment might have on individual information practices and “meta-level” information activities, or how one would “establish, use, and maintain a mapping between information and need” (Jones, 2007, p. 464).

**Research Design and Research Methods**

In order to carry out this study, two fieldwork outings into the home office of my father were scheduled, one to take place on a vacation day and the other on a typical work day for him. Before any research began, he was informed that he could withdraw from interviews or photographs (recorders were not used), and his voluntary consent to participate was obtained in the form of a signed University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics consent letter.

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 also 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 and note taking; as my father was
working that day, I received a picture of his
natural information practices for approximately
one and a half hours over two sessions. Prior to
exiting the field, a form entitled “Information
Received In and Information Sent Out over
Three Weeks” was left, on which he was asked
to record all of his professional artefact-based
(not electronic or technological) interactions
with the outside world, to be collected later
upon completion.

After exiting the field, all hand-drawn
and labelled maps and diagrams of the home
office space (two in total) were converted to
various digital formats, as were a representative
sample of the hand-drawn and labelled diagrams
of the home office features (ten of shelving
units, seven of filing cabinets, and six of utilized
flat surfaces). Photographs (sixty-two potentially
usable) were uploaded to a computer, and all
handwritten field notes and jottings (six and a
half pages) were converted to typed transcripts,
observations, and reflections.

Findings and Discoveries

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 (See
Appendix A for all Figures) 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 artefacts 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
books in piles, 1760 books on shelves, and 2652
files in drawers).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Books/ pile</th>
<th>Piles</th>
<th>Books/shelf</th>
<th>Shelves</th>
<th>Files/drawer</th>
<th>Drawers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60 (423 books/ 7 piles)</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>30 (128 books/ 4 shelves)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>100 (306 files/ 3 drawers)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The remainder of this paper is devoted
to describing and analyzing certain findings that

1 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.
were made while in the field, which follow from the study’s initial guiding research questions.

How are different types of information perceived in this environment?

The startling predominance of paper in all its varying forms all across this home office – appearing as thousands upon thousands of loose sheets, filed sheets, and bound pages in books – makes it difficult to believe that the employee is professionally discriminating toward the information artefacts present in the space. However, his interview responses repeatedly affirmed this as the case. Narratives describing his short-term daily work activities and his long-term ongoing work practices featured print documents prevalently; in fact, he alluded to the role that print resources, or books, play in his work only when prompted. The following flow chart demonstrates his ongoing work routine.

Rather than the emphasis being placed on the end results or ‘crowning achievements’ of the printing company employee’s day-to-day work, – the printed books, – the most important information artefacts in this environment are the documents that mark his initial involvement in and progress through the printing process. The price quotations, purchase orders, order updates, and final invoices that comprise “job files” are preconditions for any printed books; print resources literally come secondary to the paperwork that precedes them, and are valued accordingly.

Put another way, metadata is key in the home office of the printing company employee. The various “specs” of a given book – such as its size or “trim”, paper, binding, colours, ink, print run, cost, edition, and so on – are primary concerns, and it is on these attributes that job files centre exclusively and extensively. Likewise, metadata may be imprinted directly onto a book itself, as it is with “docket numbers”, or internally assigned job identifiers, further attesting that the ‘polished’ resource does not hold as much weight as the information about that resource does.

That the flow chart in Figure 3 provided no circumstance under which print documents would be disposed is also suggestive of the printing company employee’s feelings as to their enduring value, and his focus on maintaining rich “archives” (as he termed his filing cabinets) that hold, in his words, “the whole history” of a given book. He only mentioned disposing of documents if they concerned jobs never carried through or changed too substantially; otherwise, a physical paper trail is kept for every order undertaken.

Sample print resources are kept, too, but in contrast, are shelved upon receipt and only retrieved should a problem with them be brought to the employee’s attention. Even then, paperwork again takes on central importance to the life of the book: correspondence and invoices for corrections are interfiled with its pages, effectively taking away its status as a print resource and making it into much of a ‘document’ itself. Also telling of the centrality of papers and files to this setting is the fact that all books are disposable, remaining relevant only until more current editions are produced.
What approaches to information organization and use, conventional and unconventional, arise in this 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, clearly tabbed with the publisher’s name and the book’s 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 employee worked. Because he considers it the “easiest” system to maintain and the one that best facilitates use, he adopted it himself.

The major exceptions to this organizational scheme are the 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 the “current month’s” information at pivotal points along the route to his desk, where they will inevitably fall into his direct 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 artefacts—being that they were required and used more frequently than other print documents or resources 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 those tasks that still require his attention (p. 469).

It might be said, then, that in large part, systems of information organization and patterns of information use have carried over to the home office as they would have existed in a real office. Still, slight modifications and 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 the general 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 overall basement space, patterns of organization and use must necessarily account for its already existing structures and furnishings, such as decorative wood pillars, immovable islands, couches, and pool tables. Creative and ingenious ways to work around these features according to the needs of the home office must be employed, as demonstrated in Figure 6.

Likewise, information practices in the home office both act on and are acted upon by
the social relations in the home itself. The half-household basement, half-home office space, because of 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, these objects end up re-imposed amidst the files and books of the home office in an attempt to reinforce prior household routines, as shown in Figure 6. Information behaviours in the home office are not moderated through professional regulations or the judgments of colleagues, as they may in a real office, but are nonetheless subject to the sometimes vastly different expectations family members have about what constitutes acceptable information organization and efficient practice. 

*Are certain information channels professionally indispensable in this environment?*

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 employee never once left his desk chair: all of the information required to carry out his tasks was within arm’s 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 is far from a self-contained entity. The form entitled “Information Received In and Information Sent Out over Three Weeks,” left for the printing company employee to record his artefact-based interactions on, captured a longer span of information flow in the home office, and demonstrated that the non-technological information channels connecting the home office to the wider outside world are vital links. The completed form showed substantial volumes of information exchange happening on all but one day. The majority of information was received into the home office, and while most of these artefacts were sample print resources, of lesser value in the home office unless a problem with them should arise, the rest were documents of various metadata types, all highly valuable in order for the employee to proceed successfully in his work. Undeniably, technology links the home office and outside world, yet the “Information Received In and Information Sent Out…” record suggested that traditional information channels, such as mail and parcel delivery services, are an important means of sustaining the printing company employee in a home office.

Based on this discovery, Lee’s (2003) “structure of users’ information spaces” (p. 432) model provided a framework within which the home office could be conceptualized in this paper. Like the academics Lee (2003) studied, whose information practices occurred mostly within “immediate” offices and occasionally
within “adjacent” and “outside” spaces like libraries, the information behaviours of the printing company employee working from home dissipated outward from an “inner” hub of critical, independent information activities to include less frequent, but nonetheless essential, interactions with the broader world.

Conclusion

This research study has aimed to provide a basis from which to theorize about information behaviours and practices as they occur within the home office environment. While the printing company employee’s professional concerns surrounding informational content remain largely unaltered and suggest an independence from matters of setting, his organizational habits and patterns of information use have necessarily been adapted, and certain information channels connecting him to a broader outside world are seemingly more important than ever before.

Building upon this study, future studies may 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, perhaps using a wider sample of home office spaces and considering 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 seems to suggest that the home office is 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.
Appendix A: Figures 1 through 8

Figure 1: The basement home office space of a printing company employee, depicted in three images. The first (on the 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 (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.
Figure 3: A flow chart visualizing the ongoing work routine of the printing company employee.

Figure 4: The ascendency of metadata, in various manifestations, in the home office of the printing company employee. From left to right, expansive filing cabinets, files, and papers hold information about print resources, and metadata may be written directly on the finished, printed books themselves.
Figure 5: A finished resource that requires correction, and the necessary related paperwork filed within its own pages.

Figure 6: Information organization and use in the home office incorporate "built" features of the home itself, and occur within wooden framing, around pool table pockets, and overtop of couches.

Figure 7: Information organization and use in the home office are modified based on social relations in the home itself. From left to right, everyday household objects such as vegetables (in the green basin), travel coolers, and Christmas decorations on top of the filing cabinets in the second picture, appear amidst home office documents and resources. In the third picture, another family member voluntarily takes on the role of ‘managing’ documents that were deemed of no use in the home office.
Figure 8: Model showing the information behaviours of the printing company employee in the home office, which disperse from a “critical inner office space” of “active” information artefacts, 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 on the right.
References


