



## ‘Small acts of cunning’: Bureaucracy, inspection and the career, c. 1890–1914<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

The expansion of the managerial bureaucracy is a key organisational innovation of the late nineteenth century. Alfred Chandler has depicted this as a natural phenomenon triggered by geographic expansion and growing organisational complexity. The expansion of the branch networks of British retail banks contributed to their increased scale, but did not considerable scope for managerial choice over technology and organisation. A key development was the emergence of the bureaucratic career as the central form of control over individual performance and the presentation of the self. The development of the career was paralleled by the elaboration of ‘small acts of cunning’, organisational routines and reporting devices to monitor, track and discipline the individual over the long run.

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### 1. Introduction

The rise of the bureaucratic career from the mid-nineteenth century onwards has been a defining issue for Anglo-American business history. For [Chandler \(1977\)](#), the ‘visible hand’ of the giant corporation displaced the ‘invisible hand’ of the market as the central

<sup>☆</sup> The cartoons were the work of Robert Shirlaw (1883–1930), who joined the Bank of Scotland in 1899 and worked as a clerk until his death. Shirlaw made several hundred sketches of his fellow clerks and managers, all hidden in a ‘Ledger 99’.

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coordinating mechanism of modern capitalism by the early twentieth century. As the sheer volume of economic transactions swamped the market mechanism so administrative coordination prevailed. Foucauldian analyses have identified the preconditions of the managerial bureaucracy in the slow growth of unremarkable accounting controls from the early nineteenth century onwards (see, *inter alia*, Miller and O’Leary, 1987). Savage (1998) identified the development of the bureaucratic career as the first truly ‘modern’ attempt to address the problem of industrial discipline. The great railway firms of nineteenth century Britain with their geographically dispersed workforces made face-to-face management control difficult and expensive to sustain. Promotion through elaborate job ladders was the incentive for employee self-control, an organisational innovation that triggered the development of centralised personnel record systems to monitor and compare individual career paths (Grey, 1994; Townley, 1995). We have used Savage’s path-breaking research as the starting-point for our investigation of the emergence of the career as a central feature of the experience of Victorian clerks. Here we focus on the regulation of everyday social processes; not the limit experiences of total institutions, but the governance of the mundane.

We begin by sketching the bureaucratisation and hesitant mechanisation of the clerical labour process in the late nineteenth century. Our focus is on the banking sector, particularly the development of an internal labour market in the Bank of Scotland. We then turn to the notion of the career and the institutional mechanisms that policed the depth of an individual’s self-regulation: the inspection system. The inspection system turned upon central monitoring of procedures and maintaining detailed staff ledgers, recording task competence and inferring attitudes from behaviour. The inspection system was the mechanism by which the individual was rendered visible as an employee (Miller and O’Leary, 1987). The individual was now exposed to new forms of administration, management and raised expectations of self-management. Inspection remained a descriptive, linguistic system for many decades and was not ‘rapidly superseded or at the very least accompanied by traces’ of ordinal, scalar representations (see Rose, 1988, p. 190). To be rendered visible was not necessarily to be made calculable; to be made calculable did not necessarily result in the individual being completely ensnared by instrumental reason.

## 2. Rationalising the manual bureaucracy

The banks were characteristic of large scale clerical organisations in their development and refinement of manual bureaucracies from the second half of the nineteenth century. Only in the inter-war period did the economic benefit of large-scale office mechanisation become so significant as to be irresistible. Before 1914 large scale data processing was performed in *manual* bureaucracies in which specialised clerks recorded transactions in ledgers, forms and correspondence, by hand (Campbell-Kelly, 1998, p. 1). Despite the bank’s growing scale, before 1914 the clerical labour process for most clerks was physically and socially intimate and often conducted in a cramped office. Employees were necessarily under the close watch of their colleagues and seldom far from management scrutiny. Such close monitoring was inevitably personal and continuous and did not have to rely on abstract, proxy methods of measuring the clerical workload or staff attitudes. Management turned on the maintenance of hierarchy and the daily consolidation of deference. Collegiality was highly prized but was

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