

## VIDEO VIEWS

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THE VDT COALITION

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Fall, 1987

## Guild Members Suffer From Repetitive Strain Injury

By Larkie Gildersleeve

As part of the Newspaper Guild's continuing efforts to evaluate the effects of the introduction of computers in the workplace, members of Local 52 were asked early this year to call me, as Administrative Officer, to describe any problems they have had working on their computers, especially concerning muscle or tendon strain.

Calls were received from 22 members, who among them work at 8 of the 12 Guild units represented by the Local. One caller was concerned about migraine headaches, three about dermatitis, and 17 calls were about repetitive strain injuries, also known as RSI. Another person had both RSI and dermatitis, which also may be related to VDT use.

Although each person had his or her own story to tell, and problems varied in degree, the RSI symptoms and medical treatments received by the group were remarkably similar.

Typically, the individual had worked at a computer keyboard more than two years before the onset of symptoms. At first, a wrist would ache, then a nerve running from the el-

bow to the hand would hurt intermittently, and the fingers tingled. If a doctor was consulted at this stage, generally it was as an incidental part of a visit made for another reason. The doctor usually prescribed rest for the aching limb and sometimes prescribed a drug to treat the swelling or inflammation.

Six months to a year later, the individual might have developed such severe symptoms that treatment by a specialist was sought. At this point the pain didn't go away after work or on weekends. Typically, the individual was awakened at night by wrist, hand and shoulder pain. Often pain had developed in both wrists.

A splint was usually prescribed at this stage. The patient was told to wear the splint at all times but frequently chose to wear it only during non-working hours or only at night.

Some workers have paid quite a personal price for their pain. Some have taken unpaid leave to get immediate relief. Two Guild members have been on disability pay, which means reduced income.

I found it interesting that everyone I talked

to said that their doctor recommended less keyboard work or hourly breaks as a means to get relief from repetitive motion stress to tendons. To my knowledge, not one of the employers in our jurisdiction has a positive program to prevent RSI, or the other aches and pains associated with keyboard work, such as shoulder and back pain. Such programs at Hewlett-Packard and Levi Strauss in our area consist of posture awareness training, hourly stretch breaks, and the provision of adjustable chairs and tables. Instead, people here are feeling as if they are on their own. Which means that if their work day is highly structured, as in the Classified Ad department, there is little the individual can do to get relief.

In view of the fact that people are often told that RSI is a natural part of aging, or that symptoms are primarily caused by the employee's off-work activities, each person interviewed was asked his or her age, prior history of muscle/tendon injury or abuse, and current hobbies.

Guild members who called ranged in age  
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### Future of Cal/OSHA Uncertain

## VDT Standard Advisory Committee Formed

In August of last year, the California Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board granted a petition by three local unions — Bay Area Typographical Union Local 21, Northern California Newspaper Guild Local 52, and Communications Workers of America Local 1576 — to begin the process of writing a video display terminal standard. The Standards Board directed Cal/OSHA to convene an ad-hoc advisory committee to "further study the necessity for VDT related standards and to report back to the Standards Board with recommendations."

The State Division of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH) has now begun to form the ad hoc committee, inviting 15 individuals to serve on the committee, including two members from labor, two from management and the rest from the scientific and professional community. Labor has protested the composition of the committee because only one slot

was provided for all three petitioners (the other labor slot is to be filled by the California Labor Federation), and even more significantly, because some of the expert members are, in fact, employed by the computer industry. DOSH has agreed to balance the committee membership before it meets.

However, the big question remains: what difference does all this make if there is no Cal/OSHA program? Governor Deukmejian recently vetoed the budget for Cal/OSHA, and if his plan to eliminate the Cal/OSHA program succeeds, there will be no Standards Board for the committee to report to. Nonetheless, DOSH has stated, "If DOSH is no longer funded, then the committee will meet under the auspices of the remaining Division of Safety & Health. That is, the advisory committee process will proceed." To what end is unclear.



NICOLE HOLLANDER

# New Technologies: Job Loss, Job Growth?

By Anne Machung

Two waves of automation have swept through the American office. The first came in the 1950s with the introduction of huge mainframe computers to the "back offices."

Most forms of automation are associated with the threat of job loss, but such fears never materialized in the 1950s. In fact, the size of the clerical force doubled between 1960 and 1980 rising from 9 million to 18 million workers.

The second wave came in the 1970s with the relatively sudden widespread use of office computers attached to video display terminals. Underlying this form of office automation was concern about the rising cost of labor in the office, spurred by the rapid growth in the size of the clerical labor force.

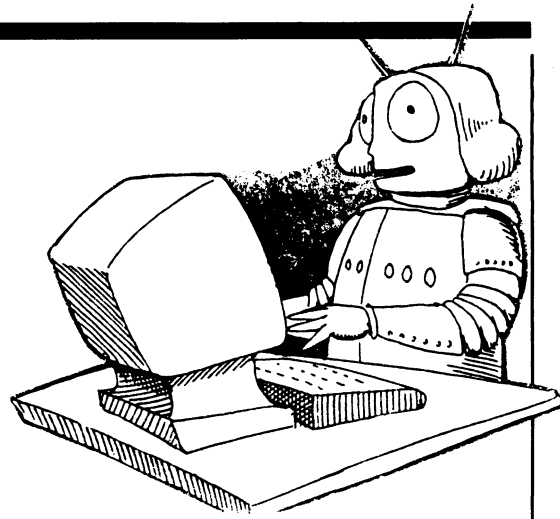
However, with the second wave of office automation, new fears of job loss and unemployment have indeed arisen.

In 1984 two economists, Wassily Leontief and Faye Duchin, predicted that if new technologies spread rapidly throughout the economy many clerical jobs would be lost. They claimed that the proportion of clerical jobs in the U.S. labor force would drop from 17.8% in 1978 to 11.4% in the year 2000.

How accurate are their predictions? A recent report issued by the National Research Council (*Computer Chips and Paper Clips*, Vol. 1, 1986) suggests that the number of cler-

ical jobs in the economy will continue to grow over the next ten years, although at a slower rate than before. Over the past 30 years, clerical work has been one of the fastest-growing occupations; the NRC does not expect that to continue. While the Council predicts that two million new clerical jobs will be added to the economy by 1995, they also anticipate some major structural shifts. Some clerical jobs — such as computer operator, EDP operator, claims adjuster and newspaper ad taker — will grow rapidly due to technology change. Other traditional clerical jobs — telephone operator, data-entry operator, stenographer, typist and file clerk — will decline, also due to technological change, perhaps leading to increased unemployment levels. Since women, especially minority women, tend to be concentrated in the declining clerical occupations, they are the ones who will be most profoundly affected by potential loss of their jobs and by the decreased demand for their job skills.

How accurate are the employment predictions of the National Research Council? The Council warns that all prediction is, at best, an uncertain art. They base their estimate of growth (but significantly slower growth) in the clerical labor force on the assumption that most of the technological changes that will influence employment by 1995 have already been developed, that the rate of diffusion of the new technology over the next ten years will



be slow, and, perhaps most important, that the economy will continue to grow at a moderate rate. If any of these assumptions prove false, their predictions might not hold up.

Moreover, the Council suggests that if the rate of technological diffusion is slow over the ten years, the economy will be able to absorb those clerical workers displaced by automation. Women may be retrained for other clerical jobs; they might also be encouraged to move into professional, technical, or managerial jobs traditionally held by men.

But what happens if automation also displaces jobs in the professional, technical and managerial sectors? And what happens if many clerical jobs are transferred overseas, to Third World countries? The National Research Council also overlooked the possibility

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## California Legislative Update:

Following is a synopsis of VDT bills introduced this session into the California Legislature:

**AB 348 (Tanner)** required the Division of Occupational Safety and Health to study the need for display terminal-related OSHA standards and report its recommendations to the Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board on or before July 1, 1988. This bill moved through the Assembly side and was passed by the Senate Industrial Relations Committee. It was vetoed by Governor Deukmejian.

**SB 781 (B. Greene)** dealt with state workers only and would have required state employers to provide free eye examinations during paid working hours for their employees who are video display terminal operators within 90 days after commencing terminal work. This bill died in its first policy committee, the Senate Industrial Relations Committee, 4 to 3.

**SB 780 (B. Greene)** contained the same provisions as SB 781 but would cover California State University employees only. This bill was made into a two-year bill and will not be heard until next year.

**AB 1279 (Hayden)** originally contained language that limited computer monitoring, allowing only one hour of monitoring a day. Members of the VDT Coalition (who were involved in drafting the bill) included provisions that prohibited monitoring of employees without their knowledge. In addition, the bill required employers to give 90-day advance notice to workers whose jobs were to be automated, and to seek funds for retraining of workers displaced by computer technology. The bill was heard before the Assembly Labor and Employment Committee in May; at that time testimony was heard from a variety of unions and monitored employees. The bill was amended and emerged only with language preventing subliminal monitoring. According to Hayden's office, the bill was headed for the Senate Appropriations Committee in mid-August. □

# Homework: Back to the Future

By Nicole Friedland and Rachel Blau

A turn-of-the-century labor practice, known as home piecework, is reemerging in the eighties.

Most often workers in these new "cottage industries" work without fringe benefits, union protection, or health and safety regulations.

In some cases, home work involves the use of chemical solvents, such as in silicon chip and jewelry piecework. When workers take these jobs into their homes, health and safety protection is often left outside the door. Not only is the employee's health in jeopardy, but other violations are likely to occur in the areas of wages, hours, and even child labor protection.

But thousands of clerical workers have also taken their jobs home with them, getting paid by the piece or at a low hourly wage for work performed on a VDT.

There is a great difference between the home work done by professionals, such as computer programmers, editors and writers, and that done by clerical workers. A professional working at home has more control over all the aspects of her or his work, with the added benefit of eliminating commute time and unwanted interruption.

Jackie Ruff, a representative of the Service Employees International Union, says, "Our concern with clerical homework is an extension of other concerns we have had about office automation: things like the routinization of tasks, low pay rates, and health and safety problems."

"It is very possible, for example, that people doing clerical work at home would be paid less than the minimum wage. How do we monitor that? These are the kinds of issues that worry us."

Clerical homeworkers are often excluded from sick leave, medical and health benefits, promotions, and paid vacations. Many are working at lower wages than the office rate and are sacrificing such things as paid coffee breaks and computer warm-up time, in addition to the social interaction in the office.

Telecommuting (connecting your VDT to the workplace through an outside telephone line) and other forms of home work have been promoted as an acceptable way for women to remain employed and at the same time take care of their children at home. However, any parent of a preschool child will recognize the near impossibility of merging these two tasks.

Many of the women who have found telecommuting to be an unrealistic alternative to finding high-quality, low-cost childcare are forced to place their children in day care fa-

cilities, even though they are working at home. Other working mothers attempt to squeeze their work in while the baby is napping, while their partners are home, or at night and on weekends during their "off time!"

Mary Dworjan, a home-based secretary from New York, recently gave testimony about her experience to the U.S. House Committee on Government Operations. Ever since her child was an infant, she has typed for a transcription service which delivers and picks up material on a daily basis.

Dworjan receives no vacation or sick leave, and depends on her husband's health insurance coverage. She rents her typewriter from the company for \$32.50 every two weeks. At first she was grateful for a job which allowed her to remain with her child, but she has found it impossible to get work done while he is awake and at home. In order to meet the stringent deadlines placed upon her, she has to work very late hours and weekends, thereby experiencing even more pressure than in her former office job.

Although some mothers find this extra strain tolerable, it seems that we as a society need to concentrate on creating a work structure that takes into consideration the hours and labor that parenting requires. A recent report by the Office of Technology Assessment of the U.S. Congress recommends that "Child care services must be greatly expanded so that women may make free and unforced choices as to whether, when, and under what terms they will work at home. Women should not continue to be compelled to struggle with individual solutions to the major societal problem of child care."

Telecommuting is undoubtedly successful from the management point of view. When companies employ telecommuters they save a great deal of money on wages, promotions, unproductive work time, and overhead costs such as electricity and office supplies. Fluctuations in the flow of work are shouldered by the homeworker. The responsibility of providing the VDT operator with a safe, healthy, ergonomically correct work environment is lifted from the employer.

Employers frequently define their clerical homeworkers as "independent contractors," thereby relieving themselves of the cost of benefits, social security, workers' compensation, unemployment insurance and income tax withholding. Unfortunately, many workers in Mary Dworjan's position are unaware that they have to relinquish a greater percentage of their earnings in the form of self-employment tax, due to the inaccurate title of independent contractor.

Many unions have taken a stand against all forms of home work. It is almost impossible for home workers to obtain the benefits of union representation. Unions can't organize workers who are isolated in the home.

The Committee on Government Operations concludes: "For many women home-based work is a desirable choice; for others it represents a better-than-no-work option. All home-based workers are entitled to full protection of the laws which cover the on-site worker. They must not be invisible cogs, but equitably treated members of the labor force. Federal and state government agencies, employers and community organizations should share in meeting this goal!" □

## Resource Center Development

The Labor Occupational Health Program is organizing a resource center on new technology in the workplace. Written materials are being collected. The Program is soliciting contributions or suggestions of references which may be included in this collection. Please send materials to LOHP, or call Susan Salisbury at 642-5507.

## Updated VDT Packet Available

An updated version of the information packet *VDTs Can Be Hazardous to Your Health* is now available. This packet gives a comprehensive overview of health hazards associated with VDTs, guidelines for a healthy workplace, and contains important sections on taking action, and guidelines and recommendations. If you would like to order *VDTs Can Be Hazardous to Your Health* please send an \$8 check to LOHP, 2521 Channing Way, Berkeley, CA, 94720. Make your check payable to the U.C. Regents.

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# Guild Members Suffer From RSI

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from twenty-six to sixty-six. Exactly half were forty years old or younger; half were older.

As for outside activities, two people had had earlier tendon stress: one due to skiing, and the other due to playing the guitar. Not one person who described an experience with RSI appeared to be currently involved in off-work activities which could be a contributing factor (such as crocheting, knitting, intensive gardening, furniture making, or tennis).

At least four of the people interviewed have had some medical history which suggests that they may be more vulnerable to RSI than others. Two had had prior bouts of tendonitis and two others had experienced poor circulation and swelling in other joints.

This information is valuable to the Guild. It is difficult to interpret the results of questionnaires, or to design new ones without some in-depth understanding of what people mean by their answers. However, these phone interviews allowed us to get an idea of the variations in individual experience as well as some of the personal considerations involved. For example, one young reporter faced a dilemma

in being afraid to demand furniture suitable to her small frame, for fear of being seen as potentially non-productive.

The problem of RSI has only recently been recognized in white-collar settings. Because RSI only affects some people, affects some intermittently, and affects everyone to different degrees, it has been difficult to get a handle on the problem.

RSI is an issue that deserves more attention. We hope to see our governmental agencies make a commitment to researching RSI, and informal surveys such as the one conducted at the Guild can play an important role in focusing the attention of researchers where it is needed. □

## Job Loss/Growth?

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ty that men displaced from blue collar jobs by automation in the factory might start competing with women for traditional clerical jobs as well as for the few new professional, tech-

## ANNOUNCEMENT!

*Laura Stock, the VDT Coalition Coordinator, and her husband Bob Matthews happily announce the birth of their first child Anna Deni Stock-Matthews born on July 17, 1987.*



nical and managerial jobs available.

The Council's conclusion that continued, though slow, growth of the clerical labor force will occur over the next ten years may be reassuring news, but clerical workers need to be asking themselves, their unions, and their employers where these jobs will be located, what kinds of jobs they will be, and indeed who will get them. □

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