

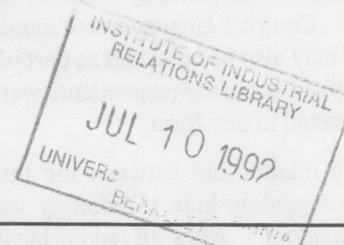
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DATABASE MANAGEMENT AND THE UNION LOCAL

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Business organizations have come to view information as a strategic resource. Internal and commercial database systems have enabled employers to gather and manipulate information in new ways. The *Wall Street Journal* recently reported on a database firm that collects records of employees who have filed workers' compensation claims, thus raising the possibility of employee blacklisting.¹ This is just one example of how database technology transforms diffuse records into powerful strategic tools.

The labor movement has also reaped benefits from the computer revolution, primarily through improvements in office administration and financial management. However, trade unionists have not been able to match management's investment in database systems so far. As reliance on these systems increases, widespread computer literacy training may become an essential prerequisite for union planning and survival. Computer literacy in the '90s will almost certainly require a firm grasp of **information management** skills. A growing number of union locals will manipulate in-house and commercially-obtained data in diverse media and formats, in order to be prepared for bargaining or other actions. The libraries and research departments of International offices are already using computer applications extensively; the local union office is likely to adopt similar strategies.

In recent years, the cost of computer systems and programs has dropped significantly, and this may provide a window of opportunity for unionists.

Microcomputers in particular present a lower-cost alternative for harnessing the strategic power of information. Database software for desktop computers is particularly well-suited for small offices, and off-the-shelf programs are within reach of modest budgets.

Of course, software and hardware seem far removed from the present-day realities facing unions. But a recent research request received by the Institute of Industrial Relations Library

illustrates the hidden cost of operating without automated assistance. A local union requested guidance in preparing a complaint against a large employer. The union wished to find out exactly how many legal actions had been filed against the employer by its employees. The union was provided with referrals and some suggestions for a research plan. However, such work is time-consuming, and best suited for outside professional researchers, on short notice. If the union had tracked grievances and other relevant events through database technology, it would have possessed a detailed record of infractions to bolster its case. In the absence of such information, the union was compelled to call upon private researchers, at considerable expense.

Need for New Research

During 1989 and 1990, the Institute of Industrial Relations Library experienced a dramatic upswing in requests from local unionists and from managers for assistance with computers: not only how to select software and hardware, but also how to learn to use them effectively. Apparently, both the labor and the management sides were grappling with the same issue. This increase in concern had not been widely addressed in the published literature covering labor issues. These requests convinced library staff that a survey of computer uses might reveal how effectively unions are managing and implementing technology. The Center for Labor Research collaborated in the survey and analysis.

The goal of this survey was to establish how prevalent database management techniques are among local union groups. Other kinds of businesses had adopted this technology in large numbers; had unions followed suit? Had there been costly false starts in the union setting, with systems that had to be disposed of? Perhaps an indication of successes and failures would enlighten planners throughout the Labor Movement.

Grievance tracking presented an information issue common to most unions; therefore, this specific "bit" of information was selected as a focus to help ascertain computer literacy levels. In addition, grievance records are suitable for adaptation to database format, and they certainly have strategic value to the union. Contract language, and summaries of arbitration histories may also be collected as part of an information management plan; therefore respondents were also asked if these data were saved in any form.

The relationship between the International and the local office regarding high technology was also of interest to the investigators. After all, some local offices interact closely with their Internationals and rely on their services, while many others make independent decisions about how their organizations should be run. A supplemental telephone survey indicated that some Internationals are currently developing centralized information systems that include a grievance-tracking function. These would be made available to the local office, increasing its options, but also increasing the need for local technology planning.

Survey Results

The survey group consisted of one hundred and twenty locals, located for the most part in the San Francisco Bay Area. A profile of this sample by type of industry and by membership size is outlined in *Tables I and II*. Respondents were asked to list activities that involved computers under five categories: bookkeeping, word processing,

grievance tracking, tracking of arbitrations and contract changes, and "other." The "other" category was used to capture additional uses or interpretations of the first four categories. Actual responses in the "other" category typically described various accounting applications, such as the use of spreadsheets; desktop publishing and salary surveys were also mentioned by a small number of respondents. A summary of the computer usage section is listed in *Tables III and IV*.

One pattern is clear in the response concerning computer use: while the majority of local offices have seemingly integrated computerized accounting and basic office work (word processing), few have adopted database techniques. In addition, larger unions did not have a high incidence of automated grievance-tracking systems, perhaps because their staffing levels enabled them to cope with the clerical load of manual systems. Unions with memberships in the 500 to 2,000 range and one or two clerical staff were most likely to have implemented database techniques. Currently, none of the unions with memberships ranging from 2,001 to 3,000 have implemented automated systems, but nearly every respondent said that they were considering such a move. Five of the nine largest respondents (over 10,000 members and up to 13 clerical staff) indicated that they were currently reviewing grievance

**Table I:
PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS BY UNION TYPE**

Type	No. of Respondents	Percent of Total
Public	60	50%
Private	65	54%
Industrial	29	25%
Transportation	18	15%
Building Trades	23	23%
Service	50	42%
Commercial/Retail	14	12%
TOTAL	120	

Respondents were encouraged to mark all industry categories that applied to their membership.

**Table II:
PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS
BY MEMBERSHIP SIZE**

Size	No. of Respondents	Percent of Total
0 – 500	36	30%
500 – 2,000	46	38%
2,000 – 3,000	13	11%
3,000 – 10,000	16	13%
Over 10,000	9	8%
TOTAL	120	

**Table III: COMPUTER-ASSISTED ACTIVITIES
BY OVERALL SURVEY RESPONSE**

Activity	No. of Respondents	% Using Computers in Each Category
Bookkeeping	34	28.3%
Word Processing	84	70.0%
Grievance Tracking	16	13.3%
Contract & Arbitrations	11	9.1%
Other	51	42.5%

Table IV: COMPUTER-ASSISTED ACTIVITIES BY UNION MEMBERSHIP SIZE

Membership by Size	No. of Respondents	Book-keeping	Word Processing	Grievance Tracking	Arbitration and Contracts
0 – 500	36	39%	47.2%	8.4%	
501 – 2,000	46	69.5%	63.2%	15.2%	4.4%
2,001 – 3,000	13	61.5%	77.0%		23.0%
3,000 – 10,000	16	64.0%	44.0%	20.0%	12.0%
Over 10,000	91	00.0%	100.0%	22.8%	45.0%

tracking programs produced by commercial vendors or by their Internationals, while only two this group currently have systems in place. The low overall incidence of grievance-tracking systems suggests that database applications are still a novelty in local union administration.

Unions with fewer than 2,000 members handle an average of 50 grievances per year, although the incidence varied quite dramatically. One educational union reported a huge increase in one year (from one or two per year to over one hundred), as a result of a new contract. Larger unions typically experience several hundred grievances annually.

Very few offices keep track of contract interpretations or arbitrations (nine percent). Two respondents indicated that their legal counsel plays a role in record-keeping in those areas.

Twelve percent of respondents indicated that they had experienced some sort of negative history with computers. One respondent described a \$21,000 system that was “never applicable or effective.” Others added remarks such as “not worth the trouble — rather do it manually”; “first system was a piece of junk — had to drop it”; “we’ll get them all to work eventually”; and so on. Hardware and software consultants and vendors were criticized as well. Comments such as “flaky company,” “poor service,” and “could use more guidance” broadcast a caveat emptor regarding such consultants. The ability to select the most suitable consultant is a critical step in any automation process, and unions with tight automation budgets would do well to contact all references before hiring one.

Despite these comments and indicators, which suggest the difficulties inherent in data transfer, twenty percent of respondents indicated satisfaction and success with their current grievance-tracking systems, after the initial dislocation triggered by the introduction of new technology subsided. The common denominators in these responses were either the careful selection of consulting support, or the presence of highly computer-literate staff or members. One respondent said “We have an in-house computer expert and programmer, a rank and file member who either works for us on lost time or donates his time.”

The findings of this survey describe an atmosphere of caution, but also of necessity: caution in reacting to additional planning and administrative duties, and a perception of the necessity upgrade administrative services. It is a small wonder that so many software vendors are marketing products to the Labor Movement. A brief review of past educational efforts, and some suggestions for the future follow below.

Continuing Education: A Basis for Building Computer Literacy

The mid 1980s saw a rise in computer training efforts by union planners, consultants and academics. For example, *Labor Studies Journal* published an article titled “The Use of Microcomputers in Local Union Administration” in the Spring of 1985.² This article suggested an array of policy issues and guidelines for the local office. Many of the theories set forth by the authors still have value in today’s environment. However, the subject of database management is covered cursorily, and the topic of access to commercial and government information is not addressed. The notion that database programs could provide access to the union’s own history of contract developments, subcontracting histories (in the building trades), or “intelligence gathering” on employers is not discussed either. In the contemporary setting, this kind of information may bring success at the bargaining table or in litigation.

Since the most important computer issue in the 1980s was to bring the union office “up and running” with computers, the emphasis was on word processing and dues tracking. But technology continues to evolve, bringing more computing power to the small office. Consequently computer literacy skills will be maintained only by an ongoing process of continuing education. New software applications are beginning to catch up with the power of the hardware; indeed, some experts speculate that forthcoming software based on the latest generation of microchips will greatly simplify computer use for computer literate workers.³ Basic computer literacy skills, such as knowledge of operating systems, database applications, and telecommunications will be essential in order to use the greater power of new technologies.

Scarce resources influence how much time and money can

be spent on training. Nonetheless, a wide variety of short-term courses are available to small offices. Community-based programs — junior colleges, educational exchange networks, and so on — provide a cost-effective means for training staff. The local office should plan to have one or more staff people receive updated training in new software, and in systems administration. This kind of base-line training can build an overall aptitude for computers, and may also have a favorable effect on employee morale, since computer literacy enhances career prospects in general.

Developing an Information Management Plan

Some guidance already exists for union locals that wish to upgrade their overall computer skills. The *Labor Guide to Local Union Leadership* contains a chapter titled "Computerizing the Local Office."⁴ Although this book was published in 1986, the guidelines set forth are very useful from a systems-management point of view.

Academic labor specialists also lead continuing education efforts. Neil Vandevord, a labor specialist at Michigan State University, recently held a conference on computer literacy and the union local. In addition to outlining the details of managing computers, Vandevord identified four basic choices facing the local office:

1. Follow guidelines set by the International
2. Hire a consultant
3. Develop your own system, using off-the-shelf software
4. Develop your own system, using custom programming.⁵

These alternatives each have advantages and disadvantages. The most important issue to clarify is whether anyone has time to learn how to shop for hardware or software, much less train themselves in how to operate database programs. The latter is not an impossible proposition. Vandevord does not discuss the hidden resource that may exist in the office, and which showed up in the Library's survey: computer hobbyists or others with detailed knowledge. Often, these kinds of individuals can help steer planners away from the worst pitfalls, or perhaps refer them to reliable consultants who may be entrusted with small budgets. Database management is a higher-level computer use, and this raises the consequences of failure. Planners should not only find the right kind of guidance, but should also train staff to maintain databases properly. Regular maintenance of the data is critical, and relatively easy to integrate into existing work patterns.

Conclusions

The value of information management to the local office will increase in the coming decade. A minimal level of computer literacy is required simply to be competitive and successful. A firm grasp of the ways in which database management can strengthen the primary business of the labor movement — advocacy for workers — will increase the movement's chance for survival in the long term.

Efforts such as Michigan State's session on computers for the union office may help to improve the labor movement's computer and information literacy skills. The other critical factors — continuing education, recognition of existing expertise in the rank and file, and good planning — are just as important. In this regard, the union local may benefit by applying its traditional support for retraining in the wake of technological change to its own administrative offices.

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