

Women, Work and Computing

Although few dispute the computer's place as a pivotal twentieth-century artefact, little agreement has emerged over whether the changes it has precipitated are generally positive or negative in nature, or whether we should be contemplating our future association with the computer more with enthusiasm or trepidation. Specifically with regard to the relationship between women and computers, a diverse body of commentary has embraced the views of those who have found grounds for expressing pessimism about this association and those who have favoured a more optimistic assessment of the current situation and its probable future development. This book undertakes a thorough evaluation of the legitimacy and predictive power of the optimistic commentary. Using a large body of original qualitative data, it interrogates the bases of what it identifies as three waves of optimism and in doing so provides answers to some of the key questions asked in this field today.

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Cambridge University Press
0521771897 - Women, Work and Computing
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Frontmatter
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University of Sussex



Cambridge University Press
0521771897 - Women, Work and Computing
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Frontmatter
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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK www.cup.cam.ac.uk
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA www.cup.org
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

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First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Plantin 10/12pt [vN]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Woodfield, Ruth.
Women, work and computing / Ruth Woodfield.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0521 77189 7 (hardback) – ISBN 0 521 77735 6 (paperback)
I. Women electronic data processing personnel – Supply and demand –
Forecasting. I. Title.
HD6073.D37 W666 2000
305.43'0904–dc21 00-028367

ISBN 0 521 77189 7 hardback
ISBN 0 521 77735 6 paperback

Cambridge University Press
0521771897 - Women, Work and Computing
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Frontmatter
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For Richard and Jess

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Preface

Since the 1970s a diverse body of commentary has emerged to chronicle the social impact of the computer. Although few dispute that this innovative machine is a pivotal twentieth-century artefact situated at the core of wide-ranging social and technical change, little agreement has emerged over whether this change has been positive or negative in nature; or whether we should be contemplating our future association with the computer with enthusiasm or trepidation. Specifically with regard to the relationship between women and computers, such commentary has included views from both those who have found grounds for expressing optimism about this association and those who have favoured a more cautious, even pessimistic, assessment of the current situation and its probable future development.

On the optimistic side, three discrete waves have emerged in the literature, each underpinned by a distinct rationale. This book begins by examining the first wave of optimism. It goes on to present quantitative and qualitative evidence which largely came to light in the US and UK during the 1980s and which rendered the rationale behind that optimism unsustainable to all but its most die-hard advocates. Chapter two discusses the rationales underpinning two subsequent waves which have become prominent as the first has receded. The rest of the book presents a body of qualitative data and analysis which provide a framework within which the legitimacy of these still extant waves can be assessed.

The majority of the data was collected in the R&D unit of a large software organisation which was originally UK-based but which expanded into a worldwide operation, establishing itself most notably in the US. It is represented here by the pseudonym Softech, and its home town by the pseudonym *Comptown*. Members of the unit were extraordinarily generous in terms of the amount of access and time they granted to me and I remain very grateful to them. They agreed to undergo lengthy interviews and periods of observation, during which they provided a wealth of information and insight.

I am equally grateful to those who spent time reading drafts of this book

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at one stage or other, and whose comments proved invaluable: Peter Senker, Laurie Keller, and Wendy Faulkner. Thanks are also due to Bridget Dick who transcribed many of the interviews, Rosa Weeks who contributed to the cover design, and Henry Rothstein who helped with my Mac hiccups; and to Caroline Nunneley, and the Woodfield and Whatmore clans for their more general support. The teaching skills of Geoff Green of Joseph Rowntree Comprehensive School in York should also be acknowledged here – he did an excellent job of inspiring an early interest in Sociology.

Finally, very special thanks are due to Richard Whatmore whose contributions throughout have been immeasurable.

Abbreviations

ASE	Advanced Software Engineering
EOC	Equal Opportunities Commission
HCI	Human–Computer Interaction
HESA	Higher Education Statistical Agency
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
KBS	Knowledge-Based Systems
SCR	Standard Charge Rate