Yates

Structuring the Information Age

Life Insurance and Technology in the Twentieth Century

Structuring the Information Age provides insight into the largely unexplored evolution of information processing in the commercial sector and the underrated influence of corporate users in shaping the history of modern technology. JoAnne Yates examines how life insurance firms—where good record-keeping and repeated use of massive amounts of data were crucial—adopted and shaped information processing technology through most of the twentieth century. The book analyzes this process beginning with tabulating technology, the most immediate predecessor of the computer, and continuing through the 1970s with early computers. Yates elaborates two major themes: the reciprocal influence of information technology and its use, and the influence of past practices on the adoption and use of new technologies. In the 1950s, insurance industry leaders recognized that computers would enable them to integrate processes previously handled separately, but they also understood that they would have to change their ways of working profoundly to achieve this integration. When it came to choosing equipment and applications, most companies ultimately preferred a gradual, incremental migration to an immediate and radical transformation. In tracing this process, Yates shows that IBM's successful transition from tabulators to computers in part reflected that vendor's ability to provide large customers such as insurance companies with the necessary products to allow gradual change. In addition, this detailed industry case study helps explain information technology's so-called productivity paradox, showing that firms took roughly two decades to achieve the initial computerization and process integration that the industry set as objectives in the 1950s.

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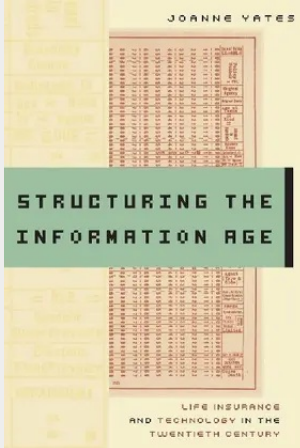

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