THE ELECTRONIC SWEATSHOP

How Computers Are Transforming the Office of the Future Into the Factory of the Past

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New York London Toronto Sydney Tokyo
Contents

Acknowledgments 7
Introduction 9

I. AUTOMATING THE CLERKS 15
1. McDonald's—We Do It All for You 17
2. With Reservations 40

II. TURNING PROFESSIONALS INTO CLERKS 71
3. The Automated Social Worker 73
4. The Machine Will See You Now 115
5. The Wall Street Broker: Decline of a Salesman 128
6. Manufactured Advice 155

III. AUTOMATING THE BOSS 161
7. The Future of Monogamy in the Office 163
8. Electronic Surveillance 205
I

McDonald's—
We Do It All for You

Jason Pratt

“They called us the Green Machine,” says Jason Pratt, recently retired McDonald’s girdleman, “’cause the crew had green uniforms then. And that’s what it is, a machine. You don’t have to know how to cook, you don’t have to know how to think. There’s a procedure for everything and you just follow the procedures.”

“Like?” I asked. I was interviewing Jason in the Pizza Hut across from his old McDonald’s.

“Like, uh,” the wiry teenager searched for a way to describe the all-encompassing procedures. “O.K., we’ll start you off on something simple. You’re on the ten-in-one grill, ten patties in a pound. Your basic burger. The guy on the bin calls, ‘Six hamburgers.’ So you lay your six pieces of meat on the grill and set the timer.” Before my eyes Jason conjures up the gleaming, mechanized McDonald’s kitchen. “Beep-beep, beep-beep, beep-beep. That’s the beeper to scar ’em. It goes off in twenty seconds. Sup, sup, sup, sup, sup, sup.” He
presses each of the six patties down on the sizzling grill with an imaginary silver disk. “Now you turn off the sear beeper, put the buns in the oven, set the oven timer and then the next beeper is to turn the meat. This one goes beep-beep-beep, beep-beep-beep. So you turn your patties, and then you drop your re-cons on the meat, t-con, t-con, t-con.” Here Jason takes two imaginary handfuls of reconstituted onions out of water and sets them out, two blops at a time, on top of the six patties he’s arranged in two neat rows on our grill. “Now the bun oven buzzes [there are over a half dozen different timers with distinct beeps and buzzes in a McDonald’s kitchen]. This one turns itself off when you open the oven door so you just take out your crowns, line ‘em up and give ‘em each a squirt of mustard and a squirt of ketchup.” With mustard in his right hand and ketchup in his left, Jason wields the dispensers like a pair of six-shooters up and down the lines of buns. Each dispenser has two triggers. One fires the premeasured squirt for ten-in-ones—the second is set for quarter-pounders.

“Now,” says Jason, slowing down, “now you get to put on the pickles. Two if they’re regular, three if they’re small. That’s the creative part. Then the lettuce, then you ask for a cheese count (‘cheese on four please’). Finally the last beep goes off and you lay your burger on the crowns.”

“On the crown of the buns?” I ask, unable to visualize. “On top?”

“Yeah, you dress ‘em upside down. Put ‘em in the box upside down too. They flip ‘em over when they serve ‘em.”

“Oh, I think I see.”

“Then scoop up the heels [the bun bottoms] which are on top of the bun warmer, take the heels—below one hand and push the tray out from underneath and they land (plip) one on each burger, right on top of the re-cons, neat and perfect. [The official time allotted by Hamburger Central, the McDonald’s headquarters in Oak Brook, Ill., is ninety seconds to prepare and serve a burger.] It’s like I told you. The procedures makes the burgers. You don’t have to know a thing.”

McDonald’s employs 500,000 teenagers at any one time. Most don’t stay long. About 8 million Americans—7 per cent of our labor force—have worked at McDonald’s and moved on. Jason is not a typical ex-employee. In fact, Jason is a legend among the teenagers at the three McDonald’s outlets in his suburban area. It seems he was so fast at the griddle (or maybe just fast talking) that he’d been taken back three times by two different managers after quitting.

But Jason became a real legend in his last stint at McDonald’s. He’d been sent out the back door with the garbage, but instead of coming back in he got into a car with two friends and just drove away. That’s the part the local teenagers love to tell. “No fight with the manager or anything . . . just drove away and never came back . . . I don’t think they’d give him a job again.”

“I would never go back to McDonald’s,” says Jason. “Not even as a manager.” Jason is enrolled at the local junior college. “I’d like to run a real restaurant someday, but I’m taking data processing to fall back on.” He’s had many part-time jobs, the highest-paid at a hospital ($4.00 an hour), but that didn’t last, and now dishwashing (at the $3.35 minimum). “Same as McDonald’s. But I would never go back there. You’re a complete robot.”

“It seems like you can improvise a little with the onions,” I suggested. “They’re not premeasured.” Indeed, the reconstituted onion shreds grabbed out of a container by the unscientific-looking wet handful struck me as oddly out of character in the McDonald’s kitchen.
“There’s supposed to be twelve onion bits per patty,” Jason informed me. “They spot check.”

“Oh come on.”

“You think I’m kiddin’. They lift your heels and they say, ‘You got too many onions.’ It’s portion control.”

“Is there any freedom anywhere in the process?” I asked.

“Lettuce. They’ll leave you alone as long as it’s neat.”

“So lettuce is freedom; pickles is judgment?”

“Yeah but you don’t have time to play around with your pickles. They’re never gonna say just six pickles except on the disk. [Each store has video disks to train the crew for each of about twenty work stations, like fries, register, lobby, quarter-pounder grill.] What you’ll hear in real life is ‘twelve and six on a turn-lay.’ The first number is your hamburgers, the second is your Big Macs. On a turn-lay means you lay the first twelve, then you put down the second batch after you turn the first. So you got twenty-four burgers on the grill, in shifts. It’s what they call a production mode. And remember you also got your fillets, your McNuggets...”

“Wait, slow down.” By then I was losing track of the patties on our imaginary grill. “I don’t understand this turn-lay thing.”

“Don’t worry, you don’t have to understand. You follow the beepers, you follow the buzzers and you turn your meat as fast as you can. It’s like I told you, to work at McDonald’s you don’t need a face, you don’t need a brain. You need to have two hands and two legs and move ’em as fast as you can. That’s the whole system. I wouldn’t go back there again for anything.”

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**June Sanders**

McDonald’s french fries are deservedly the pride of their menu; uniformly golden brown all across America and in thirty-one other countries. However, it’s difficult to standardize the number of fries per serving. The McDonald’s fry scoop, perhaps their greatest technological innovation, helps to control this variable. The unique flat funnel holds the bag open while it aligns a limited number of fries so that they fall into the package with a paradoxically free, overflowing cornucopia look.

Despite the scoop, there’s still a spread. The acceptable fry yield is 400 to 420 servings per 100-lb. bag of potatoes. It’s one of the few areas of McDonald’s cookery in which such a range is possible. The fry yield is therefore one important measure of a manager’s efficiency. “Fluffy, not stuffy,” they remind the young workers when the fry yield is running low.

No such variation is possible in the browning of the fries. Early in McDonald’s history Louis Martin, the husband of the secretary of McDonald’s founder Ray Kroc, designed a computer to be submerged in the fry vats. In his autobiography, *Grinding It Out*, Kroc explained the importance of this innovation. “We had a recipe... that called for pulling the potatoes out of the oil when they got a certain color and grease bubbles formed in a certain way. It was amazing that we got them as uniform as we did because each kid working the fry vats would have his own interpretation of the proper color and so forth. [The word “kid” was officially replaced by “person” or “crew person” in McDonald’s management vocabulary in 1973 in response to union organizing attempts.] Louis’s computer took all the guesswork out of it, modifying the frying to suit the balance of water to solids in a given batch of potatoes. He also engineered the dispenser that allowed us to squirt exactly the right amount of catsup and mustard onto our premeasured hamburger patties...”

The fry vat probe is a complex miniature computer. The fry scoop, on the other hand, is as simple and almost as elegant as the wheel. Both eliminate the need for a human being to make “his own interpretation,” as Ray Kroc puts it.
Together, these two innovations mean that a new worker can be trained in fifteen minutes and reach maximum efficiency in a half hour. This makes it economically feasible to use a kid for one day and replace him with another kid the next day.

June Sanders worked at McDonald's for one day.

"I needed money, so I went in and the manager told me my hours would be 4 to 10 p.m." This was fine with June, a well-organized black woman in her early twenties who goes to college full time.

"But when I came in the next day the manager said I could work till 10 for that one day. But from then on my hours would be 4 p.m. to 1 a.m. And I really wouldn't get off at 1 because I'd have to stay to clean up after they closed... Yes it was the same manager, a Mr. O'Neil.

"I told him I'd have to check first with my family if I could come home that late. But he told me to put on the uniform and fill out the forms. He would start me out on French fries.

"Then he showed me an orientation film on a TV screen all about fries... No, I still hadn't punched in. This was all in the basement. Then I went upstairs, and then I punched in and went to work... No, I was not paid for the training downstairs. Yes, I'm sure."

I asked June if she had had any difficulty with the fries.

"No, it was just like the film. You put the French fries in the grease and you push a button which doesn't go off till the fries are done. Then you take them out and put them in a bin under a light. Then you scoop them into the bags with this thing, this flat, light metal—I can't really describe it—scoop thing that sits right in the package and makes the fries fall in place."

"Did they watch you for a while?" I asked. "Did you need more instruction?"

"Someone leaned over once and showed me how to make sure the fry scooper was set inside the opening of the bag so the fries would fall in right."

"And then?"

"And then, I stood on my feet from twenty after four till the manager took over my station at 10:35 p.m."

"When I left my legs were aching. I knew it wasn't a job for me. But I probably would have tried to last it out—least more than a day—if it wasn't for the hours. When I got home I talked it over with my mother and my sister and then I phoned and said I couldn't work there. They weren't angry. They just said to bring back the uniform... The people were nice, even the managers. It's just a rushed system."

"June," I said, "does it make any sense to train you and have you work for one day? Why didn't he tell you the real hours in the first place?"

"They take a chance and see if you're desperate. I have my family to stay with. That's why I didn't go back. But if I really needed the money, like if I had a kid and no family, I'd have to make arrangements to work any hours.

"Anyway, they got a full day's work out of me."

**Damita**

I waited on line at my neighborhood McDonald's. It was lunch hour and there were four or five customers at each of the five open cash registers. "May I take your order?" a very thin girl said in a flat tone to the man at the head of my line.

"McNuggets, large fries and a Coke," said the man. The cashier punched in the order. "That will be—"

"Big Mac, large fries and a shake," said the next woman on line. The cashier rang it up.

"Two cheeseburgers, large fries and a coffee," said the third customer. The cashier rang it up.
“How much is a large fries?” asked the woman directly in front of me.

The thin cashier twisted her neck around trying to look up at the menu board.

“Sorry,” apologized the customer, “I don’t have my glasses.”

“Large fries is seventy-nine,” a round-faced cashier with glasses interjected from the next register.

“Seventy-nine cents,” the thin cashier repeated.

“Well how much is a small fries?”

As they talked I leaned over the next register. “Say, can I interview you?” I asked the clerk with glasses, whose line was by then empty.

“Huh?”

“I’m writing a story about jobs at fast-food restaurants.”

“O.K. I guess so.”

“Can I have your phone number?”

“Well . . . I’ll meet you when I get off. Should be sometime between 4 and 4:30.”

By then it was my turn.

“Just a large fries,” I said.

The thin cashier pressed “lge fries.” In place of numbers, the keys on a McDonald’s cash register say “lge fries,” “reg fries,” “med coke,” “big mac,” and so on. Some registers have pictures on the key caps. The next time the price of fries goes up (or down) the change will be entered in the store’s central computer. But the thin cashier will continue to press the same button. I wondered how long she’d worked there and how many hundreds of “lge fries” she’d served without learning the price.

Damita, the cashier with the glasses, came up from the crew room (a room in the basement with lockers, a table and a video player for studying the training disks) at 4:45. She looked older and more serious without her striped uniform.

“Sorry, but they got busy and, you know, here you get off when they let you.”

The expandable schedule was her first complaint. “You give them your availability when you sign on. Mine I said 9 to 4. But they scheduled me for 7 o’clock two or three days a week. And I needed the money. So I got to get up 5 in the morning to get here from Queens by 7. And I don’t get off till whoever’s supposed to get here gets here to take my place. . . . It’s hard to study with all the pressures.”

Damita had come to the city from a small town outside of Detroit. She lives with her sister in Queens and takes extension courses in psychology at New York University. Depending on the schedule posted each Friday, her McDonald’s paycheck for a five-day week has varied from $80 to $114.

“How long have you worked at McDonald’s?” I asked.

“Well, see I only know six people in this city, so my manager from Michigan . . . yeah, I worked for McDonald’s in high school . . . my manager from Michigan called this guy Brian who’s the second assistant manager here. So I didn’t have to fill out an application. Well, I mean the first thing I needed was a job,” she seemed to apologize, “and I knew I could always work at McDonald’s. I always say I’m gonna look for something else, but I don’t get out till 4 and that could be 5 or whenever.”

The flexible scheduling at McDonald’s only seems to work one way. One day Damita had arrived a half hour late because the E train was running on the R track.

“The assistant manager told me not to clock in at all, just to go home. So I said O.K. and I left.”

“What did you do the rest of the day?” I asked.

“I went home and studied, and I went to sleep.”
“But how did it make you feel?”
“It’s like a humiliating feeling ’cause I wasn’t given any chance to justify myself. But when I spoke to the Puerto Rican manager he said it was nothing personal against me. Just it was raining that day, and they were really slow and someone who got there on time, it wouldn’t be right to send them home.”

“Weren’t you annoyed to spend four hours traveling and then lose a day’s pay?” I suggested.

“I was mad at first that they didn’t let me explain. But afterwards I understood and I tried to explain to my sister: ‘Time waits for no man.’”

“Since you signed on for 9 to 4,” I asked Damita, “and you’re going to school, why can’t you say, ‘Look, I have to study at night, I need regular hours?’”

“Don’t work that way. They make up your schedule every week and if you can’t work it, you’re responsible to replace yourself. If you can’t they can always get someone else.”

“But Damita,” I tried to argue with her low estimate of her own worth, “anyone can see right away that your line moves fast yet you’re helpful to people. I mean, you’re a valuable employee. And this manager seems to like you.”

“Valuable! $3.35 an hour. And I can be replaced by any [pointing across the room] kid off the street.” I hadn’t noticed. At a small table under the staircase a manager in a light beige shirt was taking an application from a lanky black teenager.

“But you know the register. You know the routine.”

“How long you think it takes to learn the six steps? Step 1. Greet the customer, ‘Good morning, can I help you?’ Step 2. Take his order. Step 3. Repeat the order. They can have someone off the street working my register in five minutes.”

“By the way,” I asked, “on those cash registers without numbers, how do you change something after you ring it up? I mean if somebody orders a cheeseburger and then they change it to a hamburger, how do you subtract the slice of cheese?”

“I guess that’s why you have step 3, repeat the order. One cheeseburger, two Cokes, three . . .”

“Yeah but if you punched a mistake or they don’t want it after you get it together?”

“Like if I have a crazy customer, which I do be gettin’ specially in this city, and they order hamburger, fries and shake, and it’s $2.95 and then they just walk away?”

“I once did that here,” I said. “About a week ago when I first started my research. All I ordered was some french fries. And I was so busy watching how the computer works that only after she rang it up I discovered that I’d walked out of my house without my wallet. I didn’t have a penny. I was so embarrassed.”

“Are you that one the other day? Arnetta, this girl next to me, she said, ‘Look at that crazy lady going out. She’s lookin’ and lookin’ at everything and then she didn’t have any money for a bag of fries.’ I saw you leaving, but I guess I didn’t recognize you. [I agreed it was probably me.] O.K., so say this crazy lady comes in and orders french fries and leaves. In Michigan I could just zero it out. I’d wait till I start the next order and zero out the large fries. But here you’re supposed to call out ‘cancel sale’ and the manager comes over and does it with his key.

“But I hate to call the manager every time, specially if I got a whole line waiting. So I still zero out myself. They can tell I do it by the computer tape, and they tell me not to. Some of them let me, though, because they know I came from another store. But they don’t show the girls here how to zero out. Everybody thinks you need the manager’s key to do it.”

“Maybe they let you because they can tell you’re honest,” I said. She smiled, pleased, but let it pass. “That’s what I mean that you’re valuable to them. You know how to use the register. You’re good with customers.”
“You know there was a man here,” Damita said, a little embarrassed about bragging, “when I was transferred off night he asked my manager, ‘What happened to that girl from Michigan?’”

“Did your manager tell you that?”

“No, another girl on the night shift told me. The manager said it to her. They don’t tell you nothing nice themselves.”

“But, see, you are good with people and he appreciates it.”

“In my other McDonald’s—not the one where they let me zero out but another one I worked in in Michigan—I was almost fired for my attitude. Which was helping customers who had arthritis to open the little packets. And another bad attitude of mine is that you’re supposed to suggest to the customer, ‘Would you like a drink with that?’ or ‘Do you want a pie?’—whatever they’re pushing. I don’t like to do it. And they can look on my tape after my shift and see I didn’t push the suggested sell item.”

McDonald’s computerized cash registers allow managers to determine immediately not only the dollar volume for the store but the amount of each item that was sold at each register for any given period. Two experienced managers, interviewed separately, both insisted that the new electronic cash registers were in fact slower than the old mechanical registers. Clerks who knew the combinations—hamburger, fries, Coke: $2.45—could ring up the total immediately, take the cash and give change in one operation. On the new registers you have to enter each item and may be slowed down by computer response time. The value of the new registers, or at least their main selling point (McDonald’s franchisers can choose from several approved registers), is the increasingly sophisticated tracking systems, which monitor all the activity and report with many different statistical breakdowns.

“Look, there,” said Damita as the teenage job applicant left and the manager went behind the counter with the application, “If I was to say I can’t come in at 7, they’d cut my hours down to one shift a week, and if I never came back they wouldn’t call to find out where I was.

“I worked at a hospital once as an X-ray assistant. There if I didn’t come in there were things that had to be done that wouldn’t be done. I would call there and say, ‘Remember to run the EKGs.’ Here, if I called and said, ‘I just can’t come by 7 no more,’ they’d have one of these high school kids off the street half an hour later. And they’d do my job just as good.”

Damita was silent for a while and then she made a difficult plea. “This might sound stupid, I don’t know,” she said, “but I feel like, I came here to study and advance myself but I’m not excelling myself in any way. I’m twenty years old but—this sounds terrible to say—I’m twenty but I’d rather have a babysitting job. At least I could help a kid and take care. But I only know six people in this city. So I don’t even know how I’d find a babysitting job.”

“I’ll keep my ears open,” I said. “I don’t know where I’d hear of one but...”

Damita seemed a little relieved. I suppose she realized there wasn’t much chance of babysitting full-time, but at least she knew seven people in the city.

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**Jon DeAngelo**

Jon DeAngelo, twenty-two, has been a McDonald’s manager for three years. He started in the restaurant business at sixteen as a busboy and planned even then to run a restaurant of his own someday. At nineteen, when he was the night manager of a resort kitchen, he was hired away by McOpCo, the McDonald’s Operating Company.

Though McDonald’s is primarily a franchise system, the company also owns and operates about 30 percent of the stores directly. These McOpCo stores, including some of the busiest units, are managed via a chain of command includ-
ing regional supervisors, store managers and first and second assistants who can be moved from unit to unit. In addition, there’s a network of inspectors from Hamburger Central who make announced and unannounced checks for QSC (quality, service, cleanliness) at both franchise and McOpCo installations.

Jon was hired at $14,000 a year. At the time I spoke with him his annual pay was $21,000—a very good salary at McDonald’s. At first he’d been an assistant manager in one of the highest-volume stores in his region. Then he was deliberately transferred to a store with productivity problems.

“I got there and found it was really a great crew. They hated being hassled, but they loved to work. I started them having fun by putting the men on the women’s jobs and vice versa. [At most McDonald’s the women tend to work on the registers, the men on the grill. But everyone starts at the same pay.] Oh, sure, they hated it at first, the guys that is. But they liked learning all the stations. I also ran a lot of register races.”

Since the computer tape in each register indicates sales per hour, per half hour or for any interval requested, the manager can rev the crew up for a real “on your mark, get set, go!” race with a printout ready as they cross the finish line, showing the dollars taken in at each register during the race.

The computer will also print out a breakdown of sales for any particular menu item. The central office can check, therefore, how many Egg McMuffins were sold on Friday from 9 to 9:30 two weeks or two years ago, either in the entire store or at any particular register.

This makes it possible to run a register race limited to Cokes for instance, or Big Macs. Cashiers are instructed to try suggestive selling (“Would you like a drink with that?”) at all times. But there are periods when a particular item is being pushed. The manager may then offer a prize for the most danish sold.

A typical prize for either type of cash register race might be a Snoopy mug (if that’s the current promotion) or even a $5 cash bonus.

“This crew loved to race as individuals,” says Jon of his troubled store, “but even more as a team. They’d love to get on a production mode, like a chicken-pull-drop or a burger-turn-lay and kill themselves for a big rush.

“One Saturday after a rock concert we did a $1,900 hour with ten people on crew. We killed ourselves but when the rush was over everyone said it was the most fun they ever had in a McDonald’s.”

I asked Jon how managers made up their weekly schedule. How would he decide who and how many to assign?

“It comes out of the computer,” Jon explained. “It’s a bar graph with the business you’re going to do that week already printed in.”

“The business you’re going to do, already printed in?”

“It’s based on the last week’s sales, like maybe you did a $300 hour on Thursday at 3 p.m. Then it automatically adds a certain percent, say 15 percent, which is the projected annual increase for your particular store. . . . No, the person scheduling doesn’t have to do any of this calculation. I just happen to know how it’s arrived at. Really, it’s simple, it’s just a graph with the numbers already in it. $400 hour, $500 hour. According to Hamburger Central you schedule two crew members per $100 hour. So if you’re projected for a $600 hour on Friday between 1 and 2, you know you need twelve crew for that lunch hour and the schedule sheet leaves space for their names.”

“You mean you just fill in the blanks on the chart?”

“It’s pretty automatic except in the case of a special event like the concert. Then you have to guess the dollar volume. Scheduling under could be a problem, but over would be a disaster to your crew labor productivity.”

“Crew labor productivity?”

“Everything at McDonald’s is based on the numbers. But
crew labor productivity is pretty much the number a manager is judged by.”

“Crew labor productivity? You have to be an economist.”

“It’s really simple to calculate. You take the total crew labor dollars paid out, divide that into the total food dollars taken in. That gives you your crew labor productivity: The more food you sell and the less people you use to do it, the better your percentage. It’s pretty simple.”

Apparently, I still looked confused.

“For example, if you take an $800 hour and you run it with ten crew you get a very high crew labor percent.”

“That’s good?”

“Yes that’s good. Then the manager in the next store hears Jon ran a 12 percent labor this week, I’ll run a 10 percent labor. Of course you burn people out that way. But…”

“But Jon,” I asked, “if the number of crew you need is set in advance and printed by the computer, why do so many managers keep changing hours and putting pressure on kids to work more?”

“They advertise McDonald’s as a flexible work schedule for high school and college kids,” he said, “but the truth is it’s a high-pressure job, and we have so much trouble keeping help, especially in fast stores like my first one (it grossed $1.8 million last year), that 50 percent never make it past two weeks. And a lot walk out within two days.

“When I was a first assistant, scheduling and hiring was my responsibility and I had to fill the spots one way or another. There were so many times I covered the shifts myself. Times I worked 100 hours a week. A manager has to fill the spaces on his chart somehow. So if a crew person is manipulable they manipulate him.”

“What do you mean?”

“When you first sign on, you give your availability. Let’s say a person’s schedule is weeknights, 4 to 10. But after a week the manager schedules him as a closer Friday night.

He calls in upset, ‘Hey, my availability isn’t Friday night.’ The manager says ‘Well the schedule is already done. And you know the rule. If you can’t work it’s up to you to replace yourself.’ At that point the person might quit, or he might not show up or he might have a fight with the manager.”

“So he’s fired?”

“No. You don’t fire. You would only fire for cause like drugs or stealing. But what happens is he signed up for thirty hours a week and suddenly he’s only scheduled for four. So either he starts being more available or he quits.”

“Isn’t you worried that the most qualified people will quit?”

“The only qualification to be able to do the job is to be able physically to do the job. I believe it says that in almost those words in my regional manual. And being there is the main part of being physically able to do the job.”

“But what about your great crew at the second store? Don’t you want to keep a team together?”

“Let me qualify that qualification. It takes a special kind of person to be able to move before he can think. We find people that like that and use them till they quit.”

“But as a manager don’t you look bad if too many people are quitting?”

“As a manager I am judged by the statistical reports which come off the computer. Which basically means my crew labor productivity. What else can I really distinguish myself by? I could have a good fry yield, a low M&R [Maintenance and Repair budget]. But these are minor.”

As it happens, Jon is distinguished among McDonald’s managers in his area as an expert on the computerized equipment. Other managers call on him for cash register repairs. “They say, ‘Jon, could you look at my register? I just can’t afford the M&R this month.’ So I come and fix it and they’ll buy me a beer.”
“So keeping M&R low is a real feather in a manager’s cap,” I deduced.

“O.K., it’s true, you can over spend your M&R budget; you can have a low fry yield; you can run a dirty store; you can be fired for bothering the high school girls. But basically, every Coke spigot is monitored. [At most McDonald’s, Coke doesn’t flow from taps that turn on and off. Instead the clerk pushes the button “sm,” “med” or “lg,” which then dispenses the premeasured amount into the appropriate-size cup. This makes the syrup yield fairly consistent.] Every ketchup squirt is measured. My costs for every item are set. So my crew labor productivity is my main flexibility.”

I was beginning to understand the pressures toward pettiness. I had by then heard many complaints about slight pilferage of time. For instance, as a safety measure no one was allowed to stay in a store alone. There was a common complaint that a closer would be clocked out when he finished cleaning the store for the night, even though he might be required to wait around unpaid till the manager finished his own nightly statistical reports. At other times kids clocked out and then waited hours (unpaid) for a crew chief training course (unpaid).

Overtime is an absolute taboo at McDonald’s. Managers’ practice every kind of scheduling gymnastic to see that no one works over forty hours a week. If a crew member approaching forty hours is needed to close the store, he or she might be asked to check out for a long lunch. I had heard of a couple of occasions when, in desperation, a manager scheduled someone to stay an hour or two over forty hours. Instead of paying time-and-a-half, he compensated at straight time listing the extra hours as miscellaneous and paying through a fund reserved for things like register race bonuses. All of this of course to make his statistics look good.

“There must be some other way to raise your productivity,” I suggested, “besides squeezing it out of the kids.”

“I try to make it fun,” Jon pleaded earnestly. “I know that people like to work on my shifts. I have the highest crew labor productivity in the area. But I get that from burning people out. Look, you can’t squeeze a McDonald’s hamburger any flatter. If you want to improve your productivity there is nothing for a manager to squeeze but the crew.”

“But if it’s crew dollars paid out divided by food dollars taken in, maybe you can bring in more dollars instead of using less crew.”

“O.K., let me tell you about sausage sandwiches.”

“Sausage sandwiches?” (Sounded awful.)

“My crew was crazy about sausage sandwiches. [Crew members are entitled to one meal a day at reduced prices. The meals are deducted from wages through a computerized link to the time clocks.] They made it from a buttered English muffin, a slice of sausage and a slice of cheese. I understand this had actually been a menu item in some parts of the country but never here. But the crew would make it for themselves and then all their friends came in and wanted them.

“So, I decided to go ahead and sell it. It costs about 9¢ to make and I sold it for $1.40. It went like hotcakes. My supervisor even liked the idea because it made so much money. You could see the little dollar signs in his eyes when he first came into the store. And he said nothing. So we kept selling it.

“Then someone came from Oak Brook and they made us stop it.

“Just look how ridiculous that is. A slice of sausage is 60¢ as a regular menu item, and an English muffin is 45¢. So if you come in and ask for a sausage and an English muffin I can still sell them to you today for $1.05. But there’s no way I can add the slice of cheese and put it in the box and get that $1.40.

“Basically, I can’t be any more creative than a crew person. I can’t take any more initiative then the person on the register.”

“Speaking of cash registers and initiative,” I said...
told him about Damita. I explained that she was honest, bright and had learned how to zero out at another store. “Do you let cashiers zero out?” I asked.

“I might let her in this case,” Jon said. “The store she learned it at was probably a franchise and they were looser. But basically we don’t need people like her. Thinking generally slows this operation down.

“When I first came to McDonald’s, I said, ‘How mechanical! These kids don’t even know how to cook.’ But the pace is so fast that if they didn’t have all the systems, you couldn’t handle it. It takes ninety seconds to cook a hamburger. In those seconds you have to toast the buns, dress it, sear it, turn it, take it off the grill and serve it. Meanwhile you’ve got maybe twenty-four burgers, plus your chicken, your fish. You haven’t got time to pick up a rack of fillet and see if it’s done. You have to press the timer, drop the fish and know, without looking, that when it buzzes it’s done.

“It’s the same thing with management. You have to record the money each night before you close and get it to the bank the next day by 11 A.M. So you have to trust the computer to do a lot of the job. These computers also calculate the payrolls, because they’re hooked into the time clocks. My payroll is paid out of a bank in Chicago. The computers also tell you how many people you’re going to need each hour. It’s so fast that the manager hasn’t got time to think about it. He has to follow the procedures like the crew. And if he follows the procedures everything is going to come out more or less as it’s supposed to. So basically the computer manages the store.”

Listening to Jon made me remember what Ray Kroc had written about his own job (head of the corporation) and computers:

We have a computer in Oak Brook that is designed to make real estate surveys. But those printouts are of no use to me.

After we find a promising location, I drive around it in a car, go into the corner saloon and the neighborhood supermarket. I mingle with the people and observe their comings and goings. That tells me what I need to know about how a McDonald’s store would do there.”

By combining twentieth-century computer technology with nineteenth-century time-and-motion studies, the McDonald’s corporation has broken the jobs of griddleman, waitress, cashier and even manager down into small, simple steps. Historically these have been service jobs involving a lot of flexibility and personal flair. But the corporation has systematically extracted the decision-making elements from filling french fry boxes or scheduling staff. They’ve siphoned the know how from the employees into the programs. They relentlessly weed out all variables that might make it necessary to make a decision at the store level, whether on pickles or on cleaning procedures.

It’s interesting and understandable that Ray Kroc refused to work that way. The real estate computer may be as reliable as the fry vat probe. But as head of the company Kroc didn’t have to surrender to it. He’d let the computer juggle all the demographic variables, but in the end Ray Kroc would decide, intuitively, where to put the next store.

Jon DeAngelo, would like to work that way, too. So would Jason, June and Damita. If they had a chance to use some skill or intuition at their own levels, they’d not only feel more alive, they’d also be treated with more consideration. It’s job organization, not malice, that allows (almost requires) McDonald’s workers to be handled like paper plates. They feel disposable because they are.

I was beginning to wonder why Jon stayed on at McDonald’s. He still yearned to open a restaurant. “The one thing I’d take from McDonald’s to a French restaurant of my own is the fry vat computer. It really works.” He seemed to
have both the diligence and the style to run a personalized restaurant. Of course he may not have had the capital.

"So basically I would tell that girl [bringing me back to Damita] to find a different job. She's thinking too much and it slows things down. The way the system is set up, I don't need that in a register person, and they don't need it in me."

"Jon," I said, trying to be tactful, "I don't exactly know why you stay at McDonald's."

"As a matter of fact, I have already turned in my resignation."

"You mean you're not a McDonald's manager any more?" I was dismayed.

"I quit once before and they asked me to stay."

"I have had such a hard time getting a full-fledged manager to talk to me and now I don't know whether you count."

"They haven't actually accepted my resignation yet. You know I heard of this guy in another region who said he was going to leave and they didn't believe him. They just wouldn't accept his resignation. And you know what he did? One day, at noon, he just emptied the store, walked out, and locked the door behind him."

For a second Jon seemed to drift away on that beautiful image. It was like the kids telling me about Jason, the crewman who just walked out the back door.

"You know what that means to close a McDonald's at noon, to do a zero hour at lunch?"

"Jon," I said. "This has been fantastic. You are fantastic. I don't think anyone could explain the computers to me the way you do. But I want to talk to someone who's happy and moving up in the McDonald's system. Do you think you could introduce me to a manager who . . . ."

"You won't be able to."

"How come?"

"First of all, there's the media hotline. If any press comes around or anyone is writing a book I'm supposed to call the regional office immediately and they will provide someone to talk to you. So you can't speak to a real corporation person except by arrangement with the corporation.

"Second, you can't talk to a happy McDonald's manager because 98 percent are miserable.

"Third of all, there is no such thing as a McDonald's manager. The computer manages the store."