

Bruno MAHOUCHE, “Professional mobility of employees at postal sorting centers 1958-1990” (“La mobilité professionnelle des employés du tri postal entre 1958 et 1990”), DEA in contemporary history directed by Michel Margairaz Paris 8, 1997, 105 p.

This study should precede the analysis of how manpower was managed at postal sorting centers in the Paris area from 1950 to 1974, taking into account the various cultural, political, economic, and social aspects of the Post Office that more or less affected its operational system. Like any business that has to deal with a significant flow of people and objects, the post office had to work around its operational restrictions. Management needed to engage the services of a stable and regular workforce in order to be able to provide quality service and control the flow of circulation. The quality of postal service is defined by the rule of “J + 1” (“the same day + 1”), meaning that at the very latest, mail must be routed the day after it was posted. Although it never perfectly reached this goal, the post office tried to come as close as possible every year. Regular mail service is a social goal that is subscribed to the role attributed to the post office by the State. In the mind of the public, it is inconceivable that the post office would not be able to route the mail for several days. To meet these goals, postal management has to take several factors into account – the geographic distribution of the population, the number of businesses, changes in the circulation of objects and parcels that are put into the mail (which incidentally have faced competition from other carriers since 1970). They must also make choices as to means of conveyance in relation to various pre-existing infrastructures, speed, and choices made by the competition. Political agendas have been defined in relation to economic and constraints and it is often as a function of these politics that managerial staff, workers at sorting centers, and unions have decided up their stance and behavior.

In the first part of our study, we analyze the management of the workforce at the post office for the period running from the 1950s to 1974. We first present the various restrictions on operations that the post office had to confront which also had a direct effect on how the workforce was managed. We then proceed to an evaluation of the mail carriers who allowed the enterprise to recruit the staff it needed. We should also distinguish the social characteristics of the double market where auxiliary workers represent a separate section. We then analyze the content and goals of a new training program for mail sorters, emphasizing its most visible aspect that involved setting up a process for rationalizing the work to be done in sorting the mail. Finally we describe the mechanization that was gradually installed at sorting centers from the 1950s to the 1970s.

From the 1950s onward there was a visible increase in the amount of mail circulated. In 1949 the post office collected, transported and distributed 1,870 billion letters and postcards, whereas in 1959 it transported 3,480 billion. The flow of mail had increased over 80% during the period. At the same time, the amount of printed matter and periodicals rose from 1,836 billion to 2,320 billion. The problem was that the amount of mail in circulation increased more rapidly than the number of postal employees: in 1970 there were only 7% more postal workers than in 1949. From 1960 onward, the flow of mail basically increased for commercial and economic reasons. This expansion brought about considerable development of the courier services used by businesses. Publicity and mail order sales grew considerably. The amount of correspondence grew 3.6% from 1962 to 1963. In 1966 the post office noted that mail circulation had doubled in the last 15 years and foresaw that changes in the structure of the population actively working in

the primary and secondary sectors would be quite favorable to the expansion of postal services. One year later, in 1967, mail circulation reached 6.8 billion letters, 1.2 billion pieces of printed matter, and 210 million parcels. This growth coincided with a period of budgetary austerity. Such statistics were all the more detrimental in that the post office was a hands-on company: expenses for staffing represented approximately 80% of business expenses.

Hiring for jobs in public service was a significant problem in the early 1960s because candidates were scarce. In 1960 the PTT administration did not entice many applicants. The material used in some examinations was revised to lower the level of test scores, since the administration was unable to hire the number of employees its needed. The term of full-time employment did not encourage employees to sit for the administrative exams: salaries for public service positions were often lower than those in the private sector. According to the accounts of the CGT, in 1960 there were approximately 900 positions available in Paris sorting centers. The examination for men that was the basis for hiring mail sorters had barely 3,000 applicants vs. 4,000 in 1955. These numbers should be correlated with the annual number of first cycle study diplomas that were awarded, since the “brevet” was a requirement for sitting the examination for mail sorters. Nearly 80,000 people received this diploma in 1960 vs. approximately 40,000 people in 1955. Although the number of those who received the French baccalaureate rose from app. 30,000 in 1951 to 50,000 in 1959, the number of candidates for the comptroller exam was only 300 that year compared with 2,000 in 1951. In 1967, the percentage of candidates rose again: 22,000 candidates sat for the PTT examinations organized in Paris that year, representing an increase of 30% compared with the number of candidates in 1951.

In 1960 hiring policy for workers at sorting centers were defined by age, sex, and level of education. The minimum age for the external examination was 17, with a maximum age of 26. Students with satisfactory attendance in either the second level at a lycée or college could also sit for the examination. Hiring committees stood by the principle of equality. La Poste also emphasized its brand of staff management that stressed stability. From the 1950s onward the PTT sought to hire a young, qualified staff interested in having a career in postal service, avoiding those it deemed too old to forge a career in their midst. Titled administrative employees could sit for the internal exam and advance their careers. Different levels were created to provide for promotional needs. For instance, the level of “employee responsible for distribution and routing” (AEXDA,” or “agent d’exploitation de la distribution et de l’acheminement”) was created in 1971 to give mail sorters the opportunity of advancing within the ranks.

Despite the massive participation of women in professional life from the mid-1960s onward and the secular tradition of integration women into the PTT workforce, an internal hiring principle resulted in the fact that many women were blocked from working at sorting centers. From 1946 onward women staff members sorted noticeably less mail than men: on the average, a woman could sort “only” between 1,200 and 1,400 pieces of mail per hour, whereas a man could sort from 1,600 to 2,000 in the same time. It also became clear that there was a higher level of absenteeism among women than men, even if maternity leave was not taken into account. Gender played a decisive role in the way candidates were chosen until 1975; from that year forward, the PTT administration organized hiring examinations for men and women to be taken together instead of separately.

The hiring crisis of the 1970s led the PTT to find new ways of retaliating and attracting the manpower they needed. In 1956 the PTT presented a proper image of themselves and their staff before singing the merits and advantages they were offering to new recruits in an attempt to attract the young people they so desperately needed. A few social advantages were sprinkled here and there, depending on social politics and the unions' ability to mobilize employees. Postal directors occasionally changed the hiring guidelines and revised the regulations or pre-requisites for taking an entrance examination. Administrative literature of the time often underscored the argument that working for the post office offered its employees the possibility of an administrative career. But the image projected by the environment at mail sorting centers drew few young people to the examinations. At the same time the post office also promoted the possibilities for internal promotion that a large network-based business could offer as well as its various professional tracks in order to attract young people who were career oriented. The administration also orchestrated geographic mobility and promised new hires the possibility of eventually returning to work in their native region.

Other features beside the possibility of promotion and civil servant status were promoted by the post office as an influence on hiring during times of staff shortage. In 1967, for instance, postal authorities tried to integrate and stabilize staff by offering a hiring premium to new recruits from the provinces who came to work in the Paris area.

From 1948 onward a psycho-technical service was officially responsible for doing internal hiring either to fill open positions or new positions related to the technological evolution. Thanks to this service, postal managers hoped to gain a better understanding of their employees' potential. Psycho-technical tests oriented new workers to the sorting department. First and above all, it was a matter of verifying that new recruits matched certain physical criteria. In 1956 the psycho-technical service simply checked the eyesight and hearing level of employees who were expected to sort letters and parcels. Candidates placed in sorting were those who had "good eyesight, precise movements, a good memory for geographic place names and could comfortably remain standing for several hours." The PTT administration intended to give increasing importance to the psychological examination in the future. However, the selection criteria did not really change. In 1960 it was physical criteria like muscular strength, visual acuity or manual dexterity that were required to work in sorting centers. In 1965, the psychological service was simply responsible for indicating each candidate's degree of aptitude for each of the postal services.

Postal directors had problems managing the workforce due to irregularities in the flow of the mail. They were obliged to find the necessary means in order to insure that service was performed under normal conditions. The gradual installation of a dual market that took two separate forms was the response to the irregular nature of the workload in the years following the implementation of the general statute on operations and performance.

From the 1950s onward, a core of sorters and a geometrically variable support staff had to do the same work, but under different statutory conditions: work was guaranteed for the first group of workers, but the work status of the other group was precarious since they were only auxiliary workers. They would only be called upon when the available workforce was less than the minimum required. The post office used them as a variable component either on call when there were changes in the workload or when they were needed to compensate for the lack of manpower due to regular or irregular absences on the part of titled employees. When the increased flow of

mail posed serious staffing problems for the administration from the 1960s onward, the hiring of auxiliary workers was their main retaliation to quantitative changes in circulation.