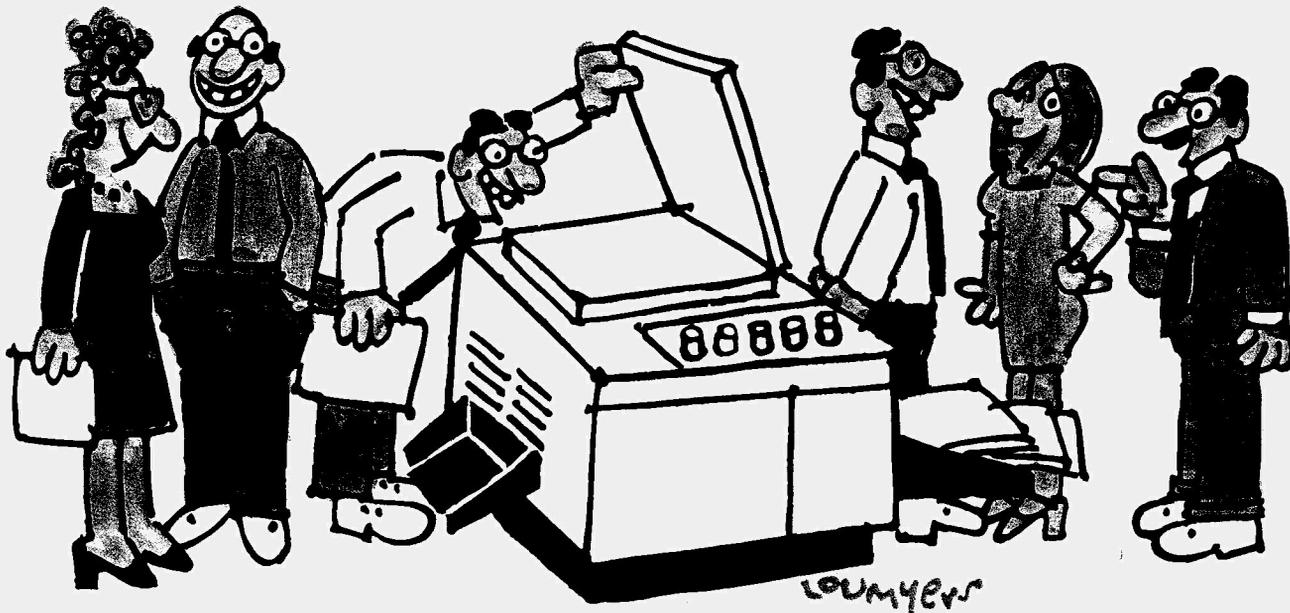


# The Social World of Distributed Copying



by Ralph Keyes

**W**hatever their drawbacks, departmental photocopiers are a great place to meet people. Organizational consultant Stephanie Winston goes so far as to call them "the new village green."

Before replacing such copiers with copy centers connected on-line to workstation terminals, it might be well to consider the contribution made by distributed copying to a sense of community in today's office.

A recent poll of office workers found that their favorite gathering place was at the "Xerox machine." Forty-one percent said that they are most likely to run into each other while making copies. By contrast, 28 percent endorse the second most social setting, the company lunchroom. Way back in the pack is yesterday's hangout — the water cooler. Only 4 percent today find water coolers a good place to socialize. It's not that making copies is preferred to drinking water. The same study (done by C. A. Pesko Associates for Minolta Corp. in cooperation with Professional Secretaries International) that found copiers the favorite hangout also discovered that making copies was second only to

filing as the least favorite chore. But several factors recommend making copies as a communal experience.

### **An enforced community**

In the first place, those standing in line before copy machines are in an enforced community much like an ocean voyage. While waiting in line, one cannot answer the phone. No boss looks over your shoulder. Coffee can't be made, or fetched. Nothing can be typed while you're waiting your turn to make copies. All you can do is stand there and get to know your neighbor in line.

"It got me dinner one night," says a secretary at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. "I was standing in line next to this guy from another department and by the time we got to the machine he'd asked me out."

A second communal attraction of copy machines is that they are such great equalizers. Jackie Kennedy Onassis was said to have stood in the copy machine line with everyone else when she worked at Viking Press.

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## **The copying machine brings people together**

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Some thought this slumming. I always figured it was just her way of getting to know people.

Like a high school locker room, the Xerox machine brings together people from many walks of life and strips away their pretenses. It's hard to maintain a pose while using a photocopier. To the contrary, you say a lot about yourself by the way you make copies — far more than you do, say, by the way you drink water.

This is the third great virtue of Xeroxing as a way to meet people: the opportunity it offers to probe beneath the surface and see what another person's really like. Some carefully study each item to be copied before making a copy commitment. Others constantly even up their little stacks of paper. Worst of all are the copy klutzes who always hesitate uncertainly before daring to push the button. Copy champs, on the other hand, excite murmurs of admiration from those waiting in line behind them as they flip paper on and off the glass like a chef making pancakes.

Protocol calls for keeping a certain distance while making such observations. Psychologist Robert Sommer, the author of *Personal Space*, calculates that an average of 42 to 48 inches of distance is kept between those waiting in line at a Xerox machine and whoever's using it. Sommer thinks that this illustrates a clear taboo against observing too closely what another person is copying.

Sommer also has noted gender differences in the

way photocopiers are approached. When two or more men confront each other at a Xerox machine, for example, they will typically engage in little displays of Xerox macho. These contests focus on proving who can copy faster without fumbling the paper. Winners keep the machine in constant motion. Penalties are assessed against those who let the green light go out for even an instant.

To the best of my knowledge no systematic research has ever been done on man- or woman-Xerox relationship. When musing about this relationship, psychologists fall into two camps. One camp sees Xerography primarily as a *taking in*, an incorporating of information that doesn't even have to be read since it feels as though it's copied directly onto one's brain. A competing school of thought sees in Xerox machines a *giving forth*, a means of regeneration. This could explain why so many extra copies are always being made of inter-office memos and reports. Seventeen sets of your thoughts about why a division should be moved to San Diego may not be absolutely necessary. But with that many copies on file, one might just outlive you.

About 750 photocopies a year are made on the average for every man, woman and child in the United States. These result not just from memo writers seeking immortality, but secretaries copying invitations, foremen duplicating bowling scores, and vice presidents sneaking an extra copy or two of Tommy's latest drawing for Aunt Sara and Uncle Moe in Fort Lauderdale. One imaginative clerk used the office copier to Xerox her diamond ring as an engagement announcement.

### **Xerox anger**

Stemming the rising tide of copies is not easy. The simple pleasure of making a few extra copies soon becomes a craving, then an addiction. If one's source of copies gets cut off, "Xerox anger" typically results. Such anger then can be displaced onto bosses, co-workers, and the walls of bathrooms. Knowing how explosive this issue can be, executives are constantly faced with having to decide whether such outrage is worth the economy of limiting their employees' access to photocopiers.

A flourishing industry has evolved in recent years to produce and sell copy control mechanisms. Many involve access cards with secret codes. As a result, having a card which gives you access to a good copier has become an important sign of office oomph. The ultimate, of course, is having your own copier — and someone else to run it. But this could get lonely. With a copier all your own, where will you get to know people? □

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*Ralph Keyes' articles regularly appear in leading magazines and journals. His books include The Height of Your Life, and Is There Life After High School?*