
Management history as told by popular culture: the screen image of the efficiency expert

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Efficiency, Management, History, Films, Television

Abstract

This exploration of management history focuses on mass entertainment media to determine the history of the efficiency expert in popular culture. It reviews the history of the image of the efficiency expert in film and on American-produced television programs. The review shows that this profession is a universal and pervasive one, permanently embedded in our culture and catholic in background, occupation and workplace. It is generally a man's job. The most significant historical trend is a sharp change from the efficiency expert as an amusing and relatively harmless character to a malevolent one who is to be feared. Although television has only existed for about half as long as motion pictures, the depiction of the efficiency expert on TV is similar to his movie image. This widely recognized profession needs no introduction to the viewer. He is a negative figure, often laughed at but never admired.

Introduction

Frederick Winslow Taylor unleashed the cultural norm of efficiency that has become an integral part of the industrialized world. His thinking "so permeates the soil of modern life we no longer realize it's there" (Kanigel, 1997, p. 7). Taylor was extremely influential in management and business administration. For example, when members of the Management History Division of the Academy of Management were polled in 1977 by Wren and Hay about the most important contributors to management thought and practice, Taylor won handily (reported in Kanigel, 1997, p. 10). A 1992 assessment described contemporary experts as continuing to "refine what he did and to add those nuances of which we are aware in industry today" (Terry, 1992, p. 274). Blackwell's 1998 encyclopedia stated that "even today many science management principles and practices are still widespread" (Cooper and Argyris, 1998, p. 581).

Similarly, public administration's intellectual roots came from Taylor (Kanigel, 1997, p. 489), focusing on operating government more efficiently and economically (Waldo, 1984, Chapter 10). The first textbook in public administration declared "that the achievements of scientific management have aroused a vast amount of dissatisfaction with the antiquated methods which have characterized many public offices" (White, 1926, p. 13). The entry for "efficiency" in a 1998 encyclopedia noted its continuing vitality (O'Neill, 1998).

Taylor's preoccupation with efficiency permeates industrial engineering. A codification of contemporary standards and definitions in 1983 included entries for efficiency, motion studies and time studies (Rigassio *et al.*, 1983, pp. 235, 239, 244). A 1992 handbook for the profession included

chapters on "Time Study" (Niebel, 1992) and "Predetermined Motion-Time Systems" (Sellie, 1992). The focus – even mania – to be efficient in all aspects of life seems to be accelerating with new technologies (Gleick, 1999, pp. 211-25 and *passim*). 24/7 is a motto that would make Taylor proud.

In management history, the efficiency expert can be studied through traditional research approaches (Tatham, 1964). However, given the omnipresence of efficiency throughout society, this exploration seeks to contribute to management history by analyzing popular culture. Specifically, it identifies the depictions of the efficiency expert on movie and television screens and then attempts to identify trends and generalizations about popular culture's view of the efficiency expert.

Overview of the movie efficiency expert

Film is used for historical research in many academic fields (Pronay, 1983; Raack, 1983), including business and government (Powers *et al.*, 1993; Smith, 1996; Graham, 1997; Jones, 1998; Lee, 2000). Movies are also used in management training (Champoux, 1999; Dubnick, 2000; Jurkiewicz and Giacalone, 2000). The University of Minnesota's Center for the History of Information Processing maintains a directory of movies about computers (University of Minnesota, 2000). A management professor maintains an on-line directory of Management Film Festival Favorites (Davidson, 2000) and a for-profit training company's Web site is entitled Management Goes to the Movies (2000).

No effort is made here to define an efficiency expert. Rather, the term was left to the sources themselves. If a reviewer or summarizer of a movie or television program used the phrase "efficiency expert" to describe a character in it, then it was accepted for use in this article. It is quite revealing to note the breadth of management activities which lay sources describe as that of an efficiency expert.



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Film portrayals of the efficiency expert

Title: *City Slicker*

Year released: 1918

Screenwriter(s): none credited.

Original literary source: none

Director: none credited. Producer: Hal Roach

Category: Silent comedy

Country of origin: USA

Character described as efficiency expert:
Harold Lloyd Anthology (A-1 Video and Film Services, 2000)

Reviews: “Short on anything approaching a connected story . . . has a wealth of good business” (*Motion Picture News*, 1 June, 1918, cited in D’Agostino, 1994, p. 113).

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Harold (Harold Lloyd) is an efficiency expert from the city who comes to a small rural hotel that is in need of modernizing. He installs all sorts of gadgets and time saving devices such as a bed that comes out of the wall, a tub that emerges from the fireplace and a telephone in the mantle picture.

Title: *Palmy Days*

Year released: 1931

Screenwriter(s): Eddie Cantor,
David Freedman, Morrie Ryskind and
Keene Thompson

Original literary source: none

Director: A. Edward Sutherland

Category: Comedy and musical

Country of origin: USA

Character described as efficiency expert:
Motion Picture Guide (Nash and Ross, 1986)

Reviews: “frantically paced comedy” (Scheuer, 1991, p. 796); “silly comic scenes . . . [with] Busby Berkeley overhead shots” (Maltin, 1998, p. 1031).

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Owner of bakery (motto: “Glorifying the American Doughnut”) seeks advice to improve his business. By mistake, the owner thinks that Eddie Simpson (Eddie Cantor) is an efficiency expert and hires him to improve operations at the bakery. He falls in love with the baker’s daughter, while his neighbor and associated gangsters try to force him to help them steal the payroll from the bakery’s safe.

Title: *The Stand-In*

Year released: 1937

Screenwriter(s): Lamar Trotti

Original literary source: 1935 serialized novel in the *Saturday Evening Post* by Clarence Budington Kelland (Nolan, 1937)

Director: Tay Garnett

Category: Comedy

Country of origin: USA

Character described as efficiency expert:
Internet Movie Data Base (IMDb), 2000

Reviews: “rollicking screwball farce” (Scheuer, 1991, p. 996)

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Atterbury Dodd (Leslie Howard) is an efficiency expert who believes everything can be reduced to mathematics. He is sent to Hollywood to see whether Colossal Pictures is a good investment. He soon learns that movie production doesn’t fit his formulaic mindset.

Title: *Cheaper by the Dozen*

Year released: 1940

Screenwriter(s): Lamar Trotti

Original literary source: book (Gilbreth and Carey, 1948)

Director: Walter Lang

Category: Comedy and drama

Country of origin: USA

Character described as efficiency expert: Narrator/daughter describes father as “an industrial engineer and a leader in the field of scientific management. If that sounds complicated, just say that he was an efficiency expert.”

Reviews: “Heartwarming and funny . . . nostalgic and corny at the same time” (Scheuer, 1991, p. 175)

Plot relating to efficiency expert: based on the real-life story Frank Gilbreth, Sr (Clifton Webb), an efficiency consultant who tried to apply the same methods to his household, with amusing results. For example, when he returns from a business trip, he summons his children and notes how long it takes them to assemble. “18 seconds,” he says, “not bad, not bad. But I still think we can make it in less.” He asks his wife to time him as he buttons his vest. Which direction is faster? Seven seconds from top to bottom while only five and a half seconds the other way. Later, he is invited to address the “international management conference in Prague.”

Him: It’s going to be a pretty high powered meeting. Attract the best scientific minds in the world.

Her: That’s why it’s such a wonderful opportunity to show other countries what motion study really is. And to have your methods accepted universally . . . It will establish you as a leader in the whole field.

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However, Gilbreth dies on his way to the conference. The movie ends with his wife delivering his paper in his stead and then successfully taking over his business.

Title: *Desk Set*, aka *His Other Woman*

Year released: 1957

Screenwriter(s): Henry and Phoebe Ephron

Original literary source: Play (Marchant, 1956)

Director: Walter Lang

Category: Comedy

Country of origin: USA

Character described as efficiency expert: Maltin, 1998, p. 338

Reviews: “Great fun” (Maltin, 1998, p. 338); “laugh-filled comedy” (Scheuer, 1991, p. 263)

Plot relating to efficiency expert: The head of a TV network hires efficiency expert Richard Sumner (Spencer Tracy) to review its research and reference department. He recommends that it be automated and computerized.

Title: *Pajama Game*

Year released: 1957

Screenwriter(s): George Abbott and Richard Bissell

Original literary source: Broadway musical (Abbott and Bissell, 1954); from the novel (Bissell, 1953)

Director: George Abbott and Stanley Donen

Category: Musical and comedy

Country of origin: USA

Character described as efficiency expert:

In script, “I’m a time study man” (Abbot and Bissell, 1954, p. 3)

Reviews: “Exuberance” (Maltin, 1998, p. 1030); “lively, infectious” (Scheuer, 1991, p. 796); “Joyous” (Pym, 1998, p. 676)

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Vernon Hines (Eddie Foy, Jr) is the time study man at the Sleepytime Pajama Factory in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He tries to increase production by forcing the employees to work faster. He says to the workers, “I’ve got my stop watch on you. Hurry up! Can’t waste time!” (Abbott and Bissell, 1954, p. 7). His motto is “*tempus fugit*” (Latin for “time flies”) (Abbott and Bissell, 1954, p. 10).

Title: *The Battle of the Sexes*

Year released: 1959

Screenwriter(s): Monja Danischewsky

Original literary source: short story “The Catbird Seat” (Thurber, 1945)

Director: Charles Crichton

Category: Comedy

Country of origin: UK

Character described as efficiency expert: Script (see excerpt in plot summary)

Reviews: “Sparkling British comedy with macabre overtones” (Maltin, 1998, p. 90); “tone shifts uncertainly between facile farce and sharp satire” (Pym, 1998, p. 62)

Plot relating to efficiency expert: American businesswoman (Constance Cummings) meets the owner of an Edinburgh tweed cloth factory:

She: I’m a business consultant.

He: You mean a sort of efficiency expert?

She: Well, it’s a little more than that. We try to apply psychology to business.

He: Apply psychology to business? My goodness, what will they think of next! . . .

Well, you’re certainly efficient.

He hires her to modernize his family business. The long-time and mild-mannered chief accountant plots to murder her to restore the status quo ante.

Title: *I’m All Right Jack*

Year released: 1959

Screenwriter(s): John Boulting and Frank Harvey

Original literary source: novel (Hackney, 1958)

Director: John Boulting

Category: Comedy

Country of origin: UK

Character described as efficiency expert: BritMovie (2000)

Reviews: “Screamingly funny” (Scheuer, 1991, p. 507); “memorable comedy” (Maltin, 1998, p. 647)

Awards: Won two British Academy Awards, for best actor and best screenplay and nominated for most promising newcomer

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Labor-management relations in a British factory are complicated by the manager’s attempt to hide a time and motion expert (John Le Mesurier) among the workers to observe their pace. The expert documents how many more crates could be loaded and unloaded if the workers were more efficient. Using the evidence, a new schedule is promulgated by management. The workers call a strike.

Title: *The Rise and Rise of Michael Rimmer*

Year released: 1970

Screenwriter(s): Peter Cook, John Cleese, Graham Chapman and Kevin Billington

Original literary source: none

Director: Kevin Billington

Category: Political spoof

Country of origin: UK

Character described as efficiency expert:
Pym, 1998, p. 760

Reviews: “Jokes fall a bit thin and the script can’t make up its mind where to go out for narrative or a string of weak sketches” (Pym, 1998, p. 760)

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Michael Rimmer (Peter Cook), a business efficiency expert, becomes very successful in business and then in politics because of his reliance on polling the audience. He eventually becomes prime minister of Great Britain and then dictator by submitting every issue to national referendum.

Title: *The Box*

Year released: 1975

Screenwriter(s): Tom Hegarty

Original literary source: Television series of same name

Director: Paul Eddy

Category: Comedy

Country of origin: Australia

Character described as efficiency expert:
Fountain (2000)

Reviews: “Sexy satire” (IMDb, 2000); “madcap bunch” (Fountain, 2000)

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Owner of TV station hires efficiency expert Dr S. M. Winter (Cornelia Frances) in the forlorn hope of making the station profitable. Employees first try to appease and impress her, but their efforts go awry. Then they try to sabotage her efforts.

Title: *Final Countdown*

Year released: 1980

Screenwriter(s): David Ambrose, Gerry Davis, Thomas Hunter and Peter Powell

Original literary source: story by Thomas Hunter, Peter Powell and David Ambrose.
Novelization of screenplay (Caidin, 1980)

Director: Don Taylor

Category: Science fiction and drama

Country of origin: USA

Character described as efficiency expert:
Script and novelization

Reviews: “Entertaining” (Scheuer, 1991, p. 347); “satisfying fantasy yarn” (Maltin, 1998, p. 442)

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Warren Lasky (Martin Sheen) works for a company

that had helped design and build the nuclear aircraft carrier USS Nimitz in the 1970s. The Defense Department has asked him to accompany the Nimitz on one of its routine cruises near Hawaii. An officer asks him about his job:

Lasky: I’m a systems analyst.

Officer: (laughs) ‘An efficiency expert right?’

Lasky: ‘Yeah, you could say that’ (In the novelization, he answers differently and acknowledges the negative image of the efficiency expert. “‘And another way of saying efficiency expert,’ Lasky said drily [sic], ‘is that; you’re a son of a bitch fifty miles from out of town.’” [Caidin, 1980, p. 23].)

Later, a different officer asks for elaboration about his profession:

Lasky: I’m a little bit of everything . . . I look at the way you people do things and, you know, if I can think of any alternatives, I write up a report and submit it to the Department of Defense.

Officer: Think you’ll find some?

Lasky: There are *always* alternatives, Commander (emphasis in dialogue).

Lasky’s presence on the Nimitz proves indispensable. The ship is battered by an unprecedented electrical storm and then loses all communications with Navy headquarters. The captain and senior officers try to figure out what has happened. Lasky insists that they consider another alternative, no matter how incredible it may be. He points out that the data they have is consistent with the ship going through a time warp to 6 December 1941, the day before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Eventually, all officers agree that this could be only correct explanation.

Title: *Spotswood*, aka *The Efficiency Expert*

Year released: 1991

Screenwriter(s): Max Dann and Andrew Knight (1992)

Original literary source: none

Director: Mark Joffe

Category: Mark Joffe

Country of origin: Australia

Character described as efficiency expert:
Alternate title of film

Reviews: “Pleasant farce” (Maltin, 1998, p. 392); “credible note of pain [mixed] into the light-hearted proceedings” (Pym, 1998, p. 850)

Awards: Won three awards from the Australian Film Institute and nominated in six other categories

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Errol Wallace (Anthony Hopkins) is a consultant who has just worked on downsizing of a large auto parts factory. His next assignment is a

small moccasin factory that seems from another era. When he first meets Mr Ball, the owner, he explains:

Wallace: We are an independent consultancy providing an independent assessment of your business performance.

Ball: “Time and Motion”, that’s the expression isn’t it?

Wallace: Well that’s a rather dated term, there are elements of performance orientated analysis certainly. But we look at your whole operation, not just manufacturing, but your equity position, debt to equity ration, market determinants, tax minimisation, the whole corporate structure (Dann and Knight, 1992, p. 11).

However, Wallace’s actual activities belie his fancy words. After observing a worker, he says:

It’s a waste of time. You make what? Fifty trips a day? You must waste twenty seconds every time you do that. Ten minutes a day, say fifty, 60 minutes a week. That’s an hour every week you could be saving (Dann and Knight, p. 19).

However, the emotionless Wallace slowly begins to see for the first time the human toll of his profession. Eventually, he urges the owner to keep things as just the way they are. Yet, this heartwarming ending is followed by a coda: “Ball’s Moccasins closed two years later. Arthur Ball died three months after that. The Moccasin Factory now houses an arts collective” (Dann and Knight, p. 82).

Title: *Tommy Boy*

Year released: 1995

Screenwriter(s): Bonnie Turner and Terry Turner; also, Fred Wolf (uncredited)

Original literary source: none

Director: Peter Segal

Category: Comedy

Country of origin: USA

Character described as efficiency expert: Knight-Rider Newspapers (1996)

Reviews: “Cinematic folly” (Pym, 1998, p. 925); “utterly predictable comedy with scattershot laughs” (Maltin, 1998, p. 1415)

Awards: 1996 MTV Movie award for best on-screen duo

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Inept heir tries to save the family business after the sudden death of his father. He goes on the road to sell the company’s products accompanied by corporation’s efficiency expert, Richard Hayden (David Spade). Hayden is the comic counterpoint to the bumbling hero, a fustbudget who is super-organized and unemotional. For example, when given an assignment, he says he’ll “run these figures by accounting. My fellow nerds

and I will retire to the nerdery with our calculators.”

Title: *The Champagne Safari*

Year released: 1995

Screenwriter(s): Harold Crooks, John Kramer and Steve Lucas

Original literary source: none

Director: John Kramer and George Ungar

Category: documentary

Country of origin: Canada

Character described as efficiency expert: Dudek (1997)

Reviews: “Holds your attention” (Kirkland, 1995)

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Charles Bedaux was a self-made millionaire in the USA in the 1930s as an industrialist and then as an efficiency expert. He pioneered new ways to speed up assembly lines. The documentary is a mixture of his biography and footage of Bedaux’s expedition across the uncharted Canadian Rockies. He later hosted the wedding of abdicated British King Edward VIII to Wallis Simpson and toured Nazi factories with them. As a Nazi sympathizer he was arrested for treason and committed suicide in 1944.

Title: *Dunston Checks In*

Year released: 1996

Screenwriter(s): John Hopkins and Bruce Graham

Original literary source: Story by John Hopkins

Director: Ken Kwapis

Category: Comedy for children

Country of origin: Canada

Character described as efficiency expert: Feeney (1996)

Reviews: “Easy to take kids’ comedy” (Maltin, 1998, p. 383); “obvious, trite and unfunny” (Feeney, 1996)

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Jewel thief takes room at opulent hotel in preparation for heisting guests’ jewelry. Hotel owner Mrs Dubrow (Faye Dunaway) considers herself an efficiency expert and is constantly riding the hotel staff. For example, she says, “I like psychotic people. They get things done.” Dubrow thinks the thief is actually a hotel critic travelling incognito. Trying to impress him, she makes life even more miserable for the employees.

Title: *American Beauty*

Year released: 1999

Screenwriter(s): Alan Ball (1999)

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Original literary source: none

Director: Sam Mendes

Category: Comedy and drama

Country of origin: USA

Character described as efficiency expert:
Script (Ball, 1999, p. 9)

Reviews: “Satire so scalding . . . strikes an
unusually successful balance between the
mordant and bright . . . piercing vision”
(Maslin, 1999)

Awards: five Oscars, including best actor,
best director, best picture and best writing

Plot relating to efficiency expert: To cut costs,
the management at a media trade publication
brings in efficiency expert Brad Dupree
(Barry Del Sherman). Dupree then meets
with one of the employees:

Dupree: So I’m sure you can understand the
need to cut corners around here.

Burnham: Oh, sure. Times are tight, and you
gotta free up cash. Gotta spend money to
make money. Right?

Dupree: Exactly . . . Nobody’s getting fired yet.
That’s why we’re having everyone write out a
job description, mapping out in detail how
they can contribute. That way, management
can assess who’s valuable and –

Burnham (interrupting): – Who’s expendable.

Dupree: It’s just business (Ball, 1999, pp. 6-7).

Title: *Mr Death: The Rise and Fall of
Fred A. Leuchter, Jr*

Year released: 1999

Screenwriter(s): none credited

Original literary source: none

Director: Errol Morris

Category: documentary

Country of origin: Canada

Character described as efficiency expert:
Insomniac Movie Reviews (2000)

Reviews: “Discomforting” (Howe, 2000);
“disquieting” (Morris, 2000)

Awards: Best documentary from Dallas-Fort
Worth Film Critics Association, nominated
for best directing of a documentary by
Directors Guild of America

Plot relating to efficiency expert: The career
of efficiency expert Leuchter, who worked to
improve the methods of killing convicts
sentenced to death and then became a
holocaust denier.

Title: *Office Space*

Year released: 1999

Screenwriter(s): Mike Judge

Original literary source: none

Director: Mike Judge

Category: Comedy

Country of origin: USA

Character described as efficiency expert:
Script

Reviews: “Comic cry of rage against the
nightmare of modern office life” (Ebert, 1999);
“hilarious sendup of cubicle culture”
(Kempley, 1999)

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Peter
Gibbons is a long-suffering “everyman” who
hates his computer-programming job. The
company hires two efficiency experts, Bob
Slydell (John C. McGinley) and Bob Porter
(Paul Willson) to downsize the company.
They explain their approach:

Porter We always like to avoid confrontation,
whenever possible.

Slydell: We find it’s always better to fire
people on Friday. Studies have statistically
shown that there’s less of a chance of an
incident if you do it at the end of the week.

Gibbons wants to be fired. He arrives at work
late and leaves early, wears inappropriate
attire and ignores his boss. In the twisted
world of corporate thinking, this standout
behavior impresses the efficiency experts.
They see a “straight shooter with upper
management written all over him.” Gibbons
is promoted.

Title: *The Specialist*, aka *Un Spécialiste and
Ein Spezialist*

Year released: 1999 (Germany and France),
2000 (USA)

Screenwriter(s): Rony Brauman and
Eyal Sivan

Original literary source: none

Director: Eyal Sivan

Category: documentary

Country of origin: French, German, Belgian,
Austrian and Israeli co-production

Character described as efficiency expert:
Cockrell (1999a)

Reviews: “Singularly assured, sure-to-be
controversial documentary . . . Cutting edge,
unique” (Cockrell, 1999b)

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Portrait of
Adolph Eichman, the chief Nazi functionary
for implementing the Holocaust, who
considered himself merely a logistics
efficiency expert who was following orders.
Most of the footage comes from Eichman’s
1961 trial in Jerusalem.

Title: *Cast Away*

Year released: 2000

Screenwriter(s): William Broyles (2000)

Original literary source: none

Director: Robert Zemeckis

Category: Drama and adventure

Country of origin: USA

Character described as efficiency expert:
Holden (2000)

Reviews: “As compelling a cinematic
adventure as any Hollywood has produced”
(Holden, 2000)

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Chuck
Noland (Tom Hanks) is a troubleshooter for
Federal Express. When critiquing the slow
handling of packages at the Moscow shipping
center in Russia, he berates the employees,
“Time rules over us without mercy . . . We live
or we die by the clock . . . 87 hours [to deliver a
package] is a shameless outrage, 87 hours is
an eternity.” Later, a FedEx plane he is on
crashes in the Pacific. He is the only survivor
to make it to an uninhabited and remote
island. During the four years he is stranded
there, he discovers that to survive he needs to
view time in a totally different way.

Trends in film portrayals of the efficiency expert

What do these 20 films tell us about popular
culture’s take on management history? The
efficiency expert is an enduring profession
over time, first depicted in silent era movies
and continuing through to the twenty-first
century. This profession is widely recognized
and associated with developed societies and
cultures throughout the world. The profession
is universal, catholic and enduring.

Common themes include a great diversity
in the efficiency experts’ nationality,
profession of origin and venue where
expertise is applied. These movies were
produced in the USA, Great Britain,
Australia and Canada. One of the
documentaries was a pan-European
production, involving French, German,
Belgian, Austrian and Israeli companies.
These efficiency experts are citizens of the
USA, Great Britain, Australia, Canada and
Germany. Their professions of origin include
accounting, computers, management
consulting, survey research polling, systems
analysis, hotel management and top
corporate management.

They apply their expertise largely in the
world of business administration, rather
than public administration. Sixteen of the
movies take place in the private sector:
hotels, bakeries, Hollywood, family life, TV
network research department, pajama
factory, armaments factory, a tweed clothing
company, TV station, polling organization,

shoe factory, magazine and Fed Ex. Only four
take place in government: US Navy ship, the
Holocaust, execution equipment at prisons
and (partly) the UK prime ministership.

Other commonalities include gender and
population category. Efficiency experts in the
20 movies are predominantly white men,
with only three white women. Most films
occur in anonymous urban areas. A few of
the locales are identified, including New
York City, Los Angeles, Cedar Rapids (Iowa),
London and Edinburgh. When the efficiency
expert is out of his natural urban habitat, he
is not as effective or successful, whether
professionally (*City Slicker*, *Spotswood*) or in
his private life (*Cast Away*).

The most striking trend is the change in
the presentation of the efficiency expert. In
the earliest films, he is the hero of the movie,
a central character that the audience is
rooting for to be successful. He is the hero in
the first three movies (1918, 1931 and 1937)
and is one of the heroes in the *Final
Countdown* (1980). In two later movies, he
becomes the hero by rejecting efficiency
preoccupation (*Spotswood*, *Cast Away*).

Whether hero or not, the efficiency expert
shifts from a comedic and laughable character
to a generally serious, menacing and near-evil
character. Of the 20 movies, the first ten
movies (1918-1975) are all comedies and
satires. The depiction of the efficiency expert
is in good humor, usually as the butt of good-
natured joking. He is presented in broad,
satiric and near-absurd ways. While he may
want to hurry things up, his work doesn’t
inflict serious pain on the victims. The
viewers don’t see any real harm being done as
a result of the machinations of the efficiency
expert. Since there is no suffering occurring,
the comic tone of the movie can be maintained
throughout. Thus, from 1918 to 1975, the
search for efficiency was not depicted as
necessarily a bad thing. It may be a comic
activity, but it is understandable that various
businesses have a goal of accomplishing
efficiency. The expert is usually not a hero
and is mostly a figure of mirth.

The last ten movies on the list (1980-2000)
present a very different picture. A majority
(six) are not comedies. They consist of three
documentaries about despicable people, two
dramas and a science fiction fantasy about
the possibility of preventing the 1941 attack
on Pearl Harbor. This indicates a shift in
popular culture’s perception of the efficiency
expert. The mood of these movies becomes
much darker during the final quarter of the
twentieth century. The tone shifts to a much
more serious one, with depiction of evil or
near-evil efficiency experts. Whether in
documentaries, dramas and even one of the

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comedies (*Office Space*), the efficiency expert is someone who creates real suffering. In two movies, he is the source of ultimate suffering: death. In two other movies, the viewer sees the efficiency expert deciding which employees will be fired. Generally, these movies present the audience with victims for which it feels empathy. Nothing good or admirable results from the work of the efficiency expert. He is to be loathed, despised and reviled. Efficiency is a bad thing and the professional is a villain.

The changing image of the efficiency expert, from entertaining to negative, is particularly associated with two of the nine decades of movies covered in this review. There is a distinct clustering of the bi-polar presentation of the professional. Of the 20 movies, five were released in the 1950s (and a sixth in 1960). They were all comedies and satires. Eight movies were released in the 1990s (and a ninth in 2000). While they were a mix of comedies, documentaries and drama, in six of them the efficiency expert is a loathsome character. This presents a concise take on popular culture's generalizations about eras. The 1950s were a time of optimism, belief in progress, respect for authority and deference to expertise. Improving efficiency was a good thing. The 1990s were a sour time of insensitive and impersonal corporations engaging in large layoffs. Improving efficiency meant increasing profits by firing employees. Efficiency was a bad thing for individuals, even if it was good for profits.

Television portrayals of the efficiency expert

Title of series: *The Ruggles*

Category: Comedy

Title of episode with efficiency expert:
Charlie's Promotion

Date episode first aired: 1950

Screenwriter(s): not available

Director: not available

Character described as efficiency expert:
Ebony Showcase Theatre (2000)

Plot relating to efficiency expert:

Charlie Ruggles expects a big raise after recommending an efficiency expert to the company. Instead, the expert eliminates Charlie's job.

Title of series: *My Little Margie*

Category: Situation comedy

Title of episode with efficiency expert:
Efficiency Expert

Date episode first aired: 18 August 1952

Screenwriter(s): not available

Director: not available

Character described as efficiency expert:
Eisner and Krinsky, 1984, p. 600

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Vern prods his daughter, Margie, to find someone ambitious to marry. She teaches him a lesson by dating Dillard Crumbly (Alvy Moore), an obnoxious efficiency expert who is driving everyone in the office crazy.

Title of series: *The Abbott and Costello Show*

Category: Situation comedy

Title of episode with efficiency expert:
Efficiency Experts

Date episode first aired: 1953

Screenwriter(s): Clyde Bruckman

Original literary source: Long-running comedy act in film

Director: Jean Yarbrough

Character described as efficiency expert:
Cox and Lofflin, 1990, p. 206

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Bud and Lou have landed jobs as efficiency experts. Their first client has two daughters who are spending too much money. Bud's and Lou's job is to rein in the girls' spending. However, the girls trick the duo into taking them to a gambling casino where they lose all their money (Mulholland, 1975, p. 252).

Title of series: *Norby*

Category: Comedy

Title of episodes with efficiency expert:
permanent character in the series

Date episodes first aired: appeared in most episodes, January-April, 1955

Screenwriter(s): not available

Director: not available

Producer: David Swift

Character described as efficiency expert:
Terrace, 1991, p. 521

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Mr Rudge (Ralph Dunn) is vice president and the efficiency expert at the Pearl River First National Bank in Pearl River, New York.

Title of series: *National Velvet*

Category: Drama

Title of episode with efficiency expert:
The Efficiency Expert

Date episode first aired: April 30, 1961

Screenwriter(s): not available

Original literary source: Characters from the 1944 movie; from the novel (Bagnold, 1935)

Director: Abner Biberman

Character described as efficiency expert:
National Velvet Efficiency Expert (2000)

(This TV series kept the key characters from the film and book, but made other major changes. While the movie took place in England in the late 1920s, the TV program takes place in the USA in contemporary times. In the movie, Velvet's father was a butcher and they lived in a small town. On TV, he was a dairy farmer.)

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Harrison Willaby is hired by Winters Dairy to evaluate the efficiency of the 20 farms that supply it with milk. A young production engineer, trained at an agricultural college, he visits the farms and brusquely directs them how to increase their milk output. To the lead character, he criticizes the efficiency of her family's farm, saying, "Your father is using the best possible area for a silo as a barn and paddock for a race horse." Willaby recommends discontinuing the dairy's contract with ten farms because their production is below his expectations. Velvet's father organizes the other farmers whose contracts are renewed to refuse to supply the dairy unless it also renews all 20 contracts. The dairy relents.

Title of series: *Flintstones*

Category: Comedy and cartoon

Title of episode with efficiency expert:
"High School Fred"

Date episode first aired: 7 December 1962

Screenwriter(s): Warren Foster

Director: not available

Character described as efficiency expert:
Cannistra, 2000

Plot relating to efficiency expert:
Fred Flintstone's boss, Mr Slate, sends him back to finish high school on the advice of an efficiency expert.

Title of series: *F Troop*

Category: Comedy and western

Title of episode with efficiency expert: "Is this Fort Really Necessary?"

Date episode first aired: 6 April 1967

Screenwriter(s): Austin and Irma Kalish

Director: Hal March

Character described as efficiency expert:
Lemaster and Fergus, 1999

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Major Terence McConnell (Charles Drake) is an army efficiency expert. He has been sent to review the operations at Fort Courage, with the authority to shut it down.

Title of series: *The Man From UNCLE*

Category: Adventure fantasy and satire

Title of episode with efficiency expert:
The Man from Thrush Affair

Date episode first aired: 4 December 1967

Screenwriter(s): Robert I. Holt

Director: James Sheldon

Character described as efficiency expert:
Koenig, 2000

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Good guy Petros accidentally kills bad guy and efficiency expert Filene. Good guy Napoleon Solo assumes Filene's identity to penetrate secret Mediterranean island base of evil organization THRUSH. To try to impersonate the efficiency expert, Solo acts like an obnoxious bureaucrat. This permits him to penetrate the base.

Title of series: *Black Sheep Squadron*, aka
Baa Baa Black Sheep

Category: Comedy and war

Title of episode with efficiency expert:
"The Fastest Gun"

Date episode first aired: 22 March 1977

Screenwriter(s): Stephen J. Cannell and Philip De Guere

Director: Philip De Guere

Character described as efficiency expert:
Morton and Fergus, 2000

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Captain Floyd Matson (Paul Lichtman) is a efficiency expert during the Second World War. He studies the operations of the Black Sheep Squadron that is based on a Pacific Island.

Title of series: *The Commish*

Category: Comedy and drama

Title of episode with efficiency expert:
"The Hatchet"

Date episode first aired: 16 November 1991

Screenwriter(s): not available

Director: not available

Character described as efficiency expert:
Mandel, 2000

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Small town Police Commissioner Anthony "Tony" J. Scali clashes with the city's efficiency expert.

Title of series: *Melrose Place*

Category: Drama

Title of episodes with efficiency expert:
"Bye Bye Baby"; "They Shoot Mothers, Don't They?"

Date episodes first aired: 2 January and 16 January 1995

Mordecai Lee
*Management history as told
by popular culture: the screen
image of the efficiency expert*

Management Decision
40/9 [2002] 881–894

Screenwriter(s): Allison Robbins,
Dee Johnson and Carol Mendelsohn

Directors: Jefferson Kibbee; Charles Correll

Character described as efficiency expert:
Mitchelmore (2000a)

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Dr Peter Burns co-owns an advertising agency. He hires efficiency expert Caitlin Mills (Jasmine Guy) to study, supposedly, the agency's operations. She becomes a major headache for its president, Amanda Woodward. Peter and Caitlin are actually conspiring to nullify Amanda's employment contract and have Caitlin replace her.

Title of series: *Living Single*

Category: Comedy

Title of episode with efficiency expert:
"Stormy Weather"

Date episode first aired: 2 February 1995

Screenwriter(s): Becky Hartman

Director: Ellen Gittelsohn

Character described as efficiency expert:
Mitchelmore (2000b)

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Kyle Barker races to a store to buy a pregnancy test for a friend, partially to get away from an ill-advised one-night stand with Melissa (Roxanne Beckford), an annoying efficiency expert.

Title of company: "OfficeMax"

Category: Commercials

Titles of TV ads with efficiency expert:
Not available

Date TV commercials first aired: Mid-1997

Screenwriter(s): not available

Director: not available

Character described as efficiency expert:
Zbar, 1997

Three humorous TV commercials featured the company's stickman icon, Max, as a wisecracking office efficiency expert. He is shown interacting with actor Ben Stein, talk show host Regis Philbin and an animated character superimposed in a classic movie scene. OfficeMax's ad agency had identified the market niche for this advertising in efficiency terms, namely the small businessperson who is "pragmatic, time-poor, extremely cost-conscious and skeptical of big-business bureaucracy" (Campbell-Ewald, 2000).

Title of series: *News Radio*

Category: Comedy

Title of episodes with efficiency expert:
"Planbee; The Public Domain; Super Karate
Monkey Death Car; French Diplomacy"

Date episodes first aired: 30 September,
28 October, 4 and 11 November 1997

Screenwriter(s): Brian Kelley; Joe Furey;
Josh Lieb; Drake Sather

Director: Tom Cheronos

Character described as efficiency expert:
Klobas, 1999

Plot relating to efficiency expert: The owner of the radio station hires efficiency expert Andrea (Lauren Graham) to cut costs. The staff tries to prevent her from firing the inept Mathew, but fails. Dave Nelson, the station manager, tries to rehire Mathew. Meanwhile, Andrea hires another person to share Dave's responsibilities. She then forces all newsroom employees to take lie detector tests. The news room staff is anxious about the results, especially Lisa, who has a criminal past. Despite this, Andrea promotes her.

Title of series: *ER*

Category: Drama

Title of episodes with efficiency expert:
"Freak Show; Obstruction of Justice; Do You
See What I See?; Sharp Relief; Carter's Choice"

Date episodes first aired: 20 November, 11
and 18 December 1997; 15 and 28 January 1998

Screenwriter(s): Neal Baer; Lance Gentile;
Linda Gase; Samantha Howard Corbin;
John Wells

Director(s): Darnell Martin; Richard Thorpe;
Sarah Pia Anderson; Christopher Chulack;
John Wells

Character described as efficiency expert:
Buff, 2000a

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Due to fiscal problems, Dr Kerry Weaver considers affiliating the ER with Synergix, an ER management group specializing in balancing budgets. The company sends Dr Ellis West (Clancy Brown) to observe. Weaver agrees to attend a conference on ER management with West in St Barts. When back, Weaver begins lobbying the other doctors to approve having Synergix manage the ER. However, Weaver begins to question West's budget cuts and learns that Synergix closes most trauma centers it acquires. She then campaigns against the affiliation.

Title of series: *Just Shoot Me*

Category: Comedy

Title of episode with efficiency expert:
"Eve of Destruction"

Date episode first aired: 5 May 1998

Screenwriter(s): Jack Burditt and Pam Brady

Director: Pamela Fryman

Character described as efficiency expert:
Buff, 2000b

Plot relating to efficiency expert: Efficiency expert Bill Slatton (Dan Butler) is hired to review the magazine's operations. With his 'spit and polish' attitude, it seems that he is more interested in bullying the staff than improving their performance. It turns out that he really is the publisher's caddy.

Trends in television portrayals of the efficiency expert

An efficiency expert was depicted in 16 television productions between 1950 and 1998. Thirteen of those programs were sitcoms or another category that included comedy. Hence, the television's main presentation of the efficiency expert is light-hearted. Since a sitcom requires that its characters are permanent and issues are generally resolved during a single episode, the work of the efficiency expert never has serious negative effect on the characters in the show.

Nonetheless, although the work of television's efficiency experts is in a comic environment, their character is not necessarily comedic. In only three (Abbott and Costello, Norby, Office Max), he is likeable. In one, the efficiency expert was a permanent member of the cast. Given the sitcom formula, Norby's Mr Rudge was an amusing and benevolent person.

In the other ten appearances in a comedy, the efficiency expert is an unlikeable person. Generally the efficiency expert is seeking to do something that the audience disapproves of, such as firing someone (*Ruggles*, *NewsRadio*) or cutting costs (*Commish*, *Just Shoot Me*, *ER*). In *Living Single*, the efficiency expert is presented out of the workplace, but her profession is used to justify her obnoxious personality. In the fantasy satire of *Man from UNCLE*, when the hero wants to impersonate an efficiency expert, he acts as an unlikeable and stereotypical bureaucrat. In three TV appearances, the efficiency expert is in a drama (*National Velvet*, *Melrose Place*, *ER*). In all, he is a "heavy" in the plot.

In other respects as well, television's efficiency experts closely parallel their colleagues in films. They are overwhelmingly male (ten of 13) and only three are women (*Living Single*, *Melrose Place*, *NewsRadio*). The TV efficiency expert is never the hero that the audience is cheering on. He is never the one who saves the business, only the one who is a threat to its current composition and even existence.

The activities that make them unlikeable become sharper from the 1950s to the 1990s. The chronology of TV's efficiency experts reflects a major interval. Nine TV programs

depicted efficiency experts 1950 to 1976, a period of 25 years. Then, for 15 years, this author has been unable to locate any television appearances of an efficiency expert. After that, he again made frequent television appearances, seven times in seven years, 1991 to 1998 (with four in the 1997-1998 season). In the first grouping, the efficiency expert is amusing and relatively innocent – even if a bad guy. In the second grouping, he is a much more foreboding person, the "heavy" in the plot. This parallels the changes in the image of the efficiency expert in movies.

Finally, like the movies, the TV efficiency experts work mostly in the private sector. Of 16 appearances, 11 take place in businesses, including banking, farming, quarrying, advertising, office supplies, radio broadcasting and high fashion publishing. Only five take place in the public sector: US Army, US Air Force, municipal government, public hospital and a secret government spy agency.

Summary and conclusions

During the twentieth century, popular culture has changed the meaning of the term "efficiency expert." While the original meaning was associated with time and motion studies (*Pajama Game*, *I'm All Right Jack*), the title metamorphosed to mean practically anyone connected with unpleasantness in the workplace. As seen in movies, the efficiency expert expanded to include a fussy hotel owner (*Dunstan Checks In*), a management consultant (*Spotswood*), hired guns who fire employees (*Office Space*, *American Beauty*) and a corporate troubleshooter (*Cast Away*).

While film has been a mass entertainment medium for about a century, television has been so for about half that time, roughly 50 years. Nonetheless, just like in the movies, the efficiency expert has appeared on the television screen since the initial emergence of the medium. The first efficiency expert on film was in 1918 during the silent era and the first one on television was in 1950. Like the movies, the TV efficiency expert has been a continuing presence since then (with one major gap). This indicates the pervasiveness and permanence of the efficiency expert in popular culture.

In a century of enormous upheaval and change, the professional goals of the efficiency expert in popular culture have been relatively fixed. The significant change has been in how films and television perceive the efficiency expert. The trends in film and

television depictions of the efficiency expert are similar. Beginning as a comic, humorous and largely harmless figure, the efficiency expert gradually turns into a feared and despised professional.

This examination has been limited to film and US television. However, other forms of mass entertainment, such as radio, pulp fiction and literature have also depicted efficiency experts. "The Efficiency Expert" was the title of two radio episodes, Mel Blanc's national network radio comedy series on 10 September 1946 (*Radio Showcase*, 2000) and the sitcom series "Life of Riley" on 11 January 1947 (Mintz, 2000). In print, the title has been used for a 1921 serialized novel by Edgar Rice Burroughs (creator of *Tarzan*) (1966), a science fiction short story by W.R. Thompson (1985) and a book-length poem by Florence Converse (1934). Future research could examine these outlets of popular culture. In addition, within a few years, it will may be timely to research the efficiency expert in nascent forms of mass media, such as the Internet, video games and video streaming. He, or she, will surely make some appearances.

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