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

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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 (Rigas et al., 1983, pp. 235, 236, 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, 1984). 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.
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 mantel piece.

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)
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: “rolling 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.
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” (Abbott and Bissell, 1954, p. 3)
Reviews: “Exuberance” (Maltin, 1998, p. 1030); “lively, infectious” (Scheuer, 1991, p. 796); “Joyous” (Pym, 1996, p. 676)
Plot relating to efficiency expert: Vernon Hines (Eddie Foy, Jr) is the time study man at the Sleptite 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, 1996, 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
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
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 ratio, 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 heirs 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 counterpart to the bumbling hero, a fusibudget 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 nerdy 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, 1996)
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)
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—
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 Specialiste and Ein Specialist
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 (1998a)
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 FedEx. 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
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.

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)

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
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, 1989  
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
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: Commercial

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 episode 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 Chorones

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 1996 (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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