



What ChatGPT Says About the Early Days

In this space in the January issue, I expressed thanks for George S. Walker, the first president of what is today the Business Technology Association (BTA). I noted that he took on the role for the newly formed National Typewriter Dealers Association, which had been established in a meeting on Jan. 22-23, 1926, in Kansas City, Missouri.



In the spirit of our year-long celebration of BTA's 100th anniversary, I thought it would be interesting to see what ChatGPT has to say about office technology in 1926, BTA's founding year. The response to my inquiry begins: "In the United States in 1926, office technology was already mature, mechanical and highly systematized — but still completely pre-electronic. Think machines everywhere, electricity sometimes, paper always."

As you can imagine, "manual typewriters were universal; brands like Underwood, Remington, Royal and Smith Corona dominated," ChatGPT reports, noting that "offices used: carbon paper for multiple copies" and "preprinted forms." It also reports: "Typing pools were common and touch typing was expected. No screens. No undo. One typo would mean retyping the whole page."

My mind just went to my high school typing class; picture a room full of typewriters. As it turns out, that class has served me well. It was the late 1970s and there was still a significant focus on typewriters. In fact, my high school graduation present from my parents was a Smith Corona electric typewriter. Really. I still have it — someplace. In some regards — other than the transition from manual to electric — it seems that little changed in the typewriter world between, we'll say, 1926 and 1986 — 60 years! I say 1986, because that is the year I began

working at BTA. In those early years, I had a typewriter at my desk, not a PC. Really.

Back to ChatGPT. Let's change the inquiry a bit: "What was the typical workflow of office documents in 1926?" The response begins: "Below is the typical U.S. office document workflow in 1926, from arrival to storage." It is too long to share everything here, but among the details: letters arrive once or twice daily; sorted by department or executive; assigned to a department or individual; managers dictate [responses] into Dictaphones or directly to secretaries; the letters are typed on manual typewriters [with two or three carbon copies for each letter]; one carbon copy, assigned a classification code, is placed in a vertical filing cabinet; related documents are kept together.

Sound a bit familiar? ChatGPT thinks so: "This workflow is the ancestor of modern email, ticketing systems and document management software — just slower, louder and entirely physical." In some ways, the basic premise of the tasks in the workplace has remained intact for 100 years. The difference is the technology. Another ChatGPT inquiry: What 100-year span reflects the greatest change in terms of office technology? The response: "Roughly 1900 to 2000 shows the most dramatic change in office technology."

Wait a second. We have already established that the industry included typewriters for at least 60 years after the association was founded. It seems to me that the most "dramatic change in office technology" has come in more recent years. In fact, in some areas — think artificial intelligence (AI), for example — the pace of technology change is approaching mind-boggling. Just think about the resulting opportunities on the horizon for office technology dealers. Could it be that your dealership's best days lie ahead — in BTA's second 100 years? ■

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FLASHBACK



The association's magazine cover 46 years ago this month — the NOMDA Spokesman, February 1980.