

Women Laid Off, Workers Sped Up: Support Staff Hold a Clue to the Gendered Recovery

Bryce Covert, Mike Konczal | The Roosevelt Institute

Last Updated: July 28, 2011

When the housing market crashed and the economy first headed into a recession, many were concerned with men's unemployment. With construction and manufacturing taking some of the biggest hits, their jobs began to disappear and the male unemployment rate was alarmingly high.

But since the recovery period officially began in June 2009, the story has changed. Men are beginning to make job gains, albeit minimal ones, while women are now experiencing declining employment. During that time period, men gained 805,000 jobs while women lost 281,000. Originally, this trend was explained by women's large numbers in the ranks of public sector workers. With crunched state budgets, those jobs were slashed, dealing a blow to women's employment.

However, new research from the Pew Research Center now shows that women are losing not just in the public sector, but across practically all private sector industries as well. Pew could not find an explanation for this trend, but by analyzing the data by occupation, rather than industry, some clues emerge.

Women have lost an overwhelming number of jobs in "office and administrative support occupations." A likely explanation for this phenomenon is that in slimming down, companies are firing support staff and asking remaining employees to take on more work. This huge loss to support staff roles is making an already difficult recovery period even worse for women, and the trend is likely to continue without the creation of many more jobs.

Key Findings

- When analyzed by occupation, much of women's disproportionate job loss can be explained by the jobs cut in the category "office and administrative support occupations."
- In this category, women have lost a total of 925,000 jobs while men have gained 204,000. Women represent 75% of the nearly 17.6 million jobs in this occupation.
- A compelling explanation for this new phenomenon is the fact that American workers are being asked to take on more duties without pay increases. Companies are laying off support staff and simply distributing their work to others.
- While there may be long-term shifts taking place in the kind of work these positions will entail, in the short-term much more robust job creation is needed to help women maintain their support jobs.

BRYCE COVERT, Assistant Editor at the Roosevelt Institute's New Deal 2.0 blog, writes on the economy and its effects on women. She also writes a weekly column on New Deal 2.0 about consumer debt called "The Swipe." Her work has appeared at The Nation, AlterNet, GOOD Magazine, Gender Across Borders, and other sites.

MICHAEL KONCZAL, a Fellow with the Roosevelt Institute, works on financial reform, structural unemployment, consumer access to financial services, and inequality. He blogs for Rortybomb and New Deal 2.0, and his work has appeared at The Atlantic Monthly's Business Channel, the New York Times, NPR's Planet Money, MSNBC, CNN, Huffington Post, and The Nation.

To contact the authors, contact Glen Weiner at 212-444-9610 or gweiner@rooseveltinstitute.org.

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Background

One of the more interesting stories in the jobless recovery of the post-Great Recession era has been its different impact on men and women. From the end of the recession in June 2009 through June 2011, there has been a net increase of 524,000 jobs. But that anemic job growth has not been shared equally or proportionately among men and women. During that time period, men gained 805,000 jobs while women lost 281,000. As the recession ended, male unemployment hit 10.6%, while women's unemployment was at 8.3%. Now, male unemployment has dropped to 9.7% while the unemployment rate for women has actually increased by 0.3%.

One important explanation for these differences in the labor market has been a split between private and public sector employment. While private-sector employment has been increasing at a slow rate, public-sector employment has been falling. The losses in public-sector employment have offset much of the job gains in the past year and have, combined with other state-level withdrawals, put pressures on aggregate demand.

Women constitute a slight majority of public sector workers at 57% of the workforce. However, they account for 70% of all the losses in public sector employment, having lost 343,000 jobs versus men's 150,000. This large difference accounts for much of the job loss women have experienced.

But explaining the overall dismal jobs picture for women remains an open question. A recent study by the Pew Research Center, "Two Years of Economic Recovery: Women Lose Jobs, Men Find Them," found that the difference in employment recovery by gender was not industry specific. In virtually all industries, men have outperformed women.

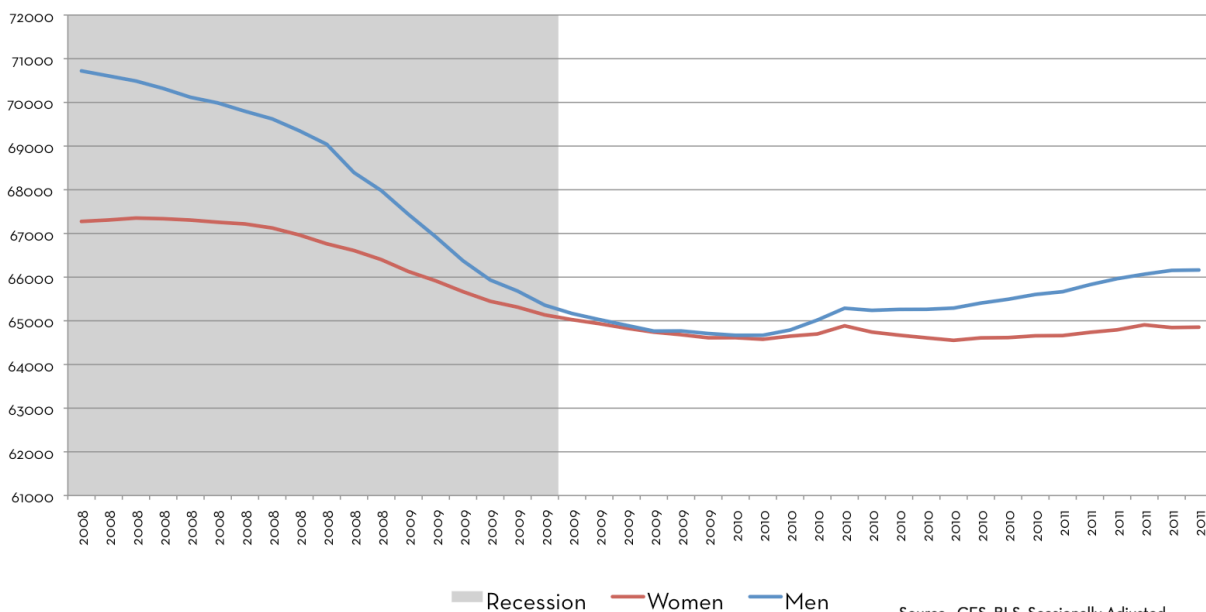
For industries where there were job gains, men did better than women in terms of their percentage of employment gains. And for industries where there were job losses, men still were less affected than women. This was true for virtually all industries.

Pew was unable to identify a compelling trend in the data that could explain this reversal of fortune. Pew concluded: "It is not entirely clear why men are doing better than women in the current recovery. An analysis of employment by sectors offers no definitive answer."

Looking at Occupations

A different approach to the data may provide some answers. Using data from the Current Population Survey, a monthly survey of roughly 55,000 households conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, one can look at occupation data for employment and unemployment levels by gender. Occupation data is broken down into multiple sub-occupations, which are gathered into high-level occupation categories. This paper looks at nine of them: Management, business, and financial operations occupations; professional and related occupations; service occupations; sales and related occupations; office and administrative support

Employment Level, in Thousands



Source: CES, BLS, Seasonally Adjusted

occupations; construction and extraction occupations; installation, maintenance, and repair occupations; production occupations; and transportation and material moving occupations.

An industry refers to what an employer does, while an occupation refers to what a worker does. Someone can be an accountant for an oil company, a state government, or a health care company. Each of those would be a job in a different industry, though all three would have the same occupation. Alternatively, someone can be an accountant, a construction worker, or a senior manager for an oil company. Those three jobs would have a single industry classification, but constitute three different occupations.

It is possible that there are different impacts not among different industries, but instead among the different types of work that are done across all industries. And here there is an interesting break in the post-Recession recovery between men and women.

Results

What does the occupational data reveal? It shows a much different recovery for men versus women. First is an examination of raw changes in terms of aggregate employment. This data compares June 2011 with June 2009 CPS data by men and women (see Figures 1 and 2).

Here the results are much different than in the industry analysis. Looking at the numbers of jobs lost, women do worse in some, better in others.

However, in one specific occupation, “office and administrative support occupations,” women do significantly worse. They’ve lost a total of 925,000 jobs while men have gained 204,000. Women represent 75% of the nearly 17.6 million jobs in this occupation.

This accounts for a major loss of jobs for women. In order to understand what is driving this, one needs to examine the subcategories that compose the meta-categories. While the monthly data is too noisy to go deeper into the occupation categories, quarterly data can be used to try to figure out what has changed. Comparing the second quarter of 2011 with the second quarter of 2009 reveals the following changes in occupations (see Figure 3).

The overwhelming losses have occurred in support staff. These occupations include secretaries and administrative assistants; first-line supervisors/managers; customer service representatives; office and

administrative support workers; production, planning, and expediting clerks; word processors and typists; dispatchers; and bookkeeping/accounting clerks.

What Does This Mean?

There are a number of explanations for why this could be happening. The first is a “great speedup” hypothesis. In this explanation, corporate America is capable of extracting the same work from fewer people by squeezing them harder. In so much as administrative assistants ease the work burden, their dismissal means there is more work for everyone else to do.

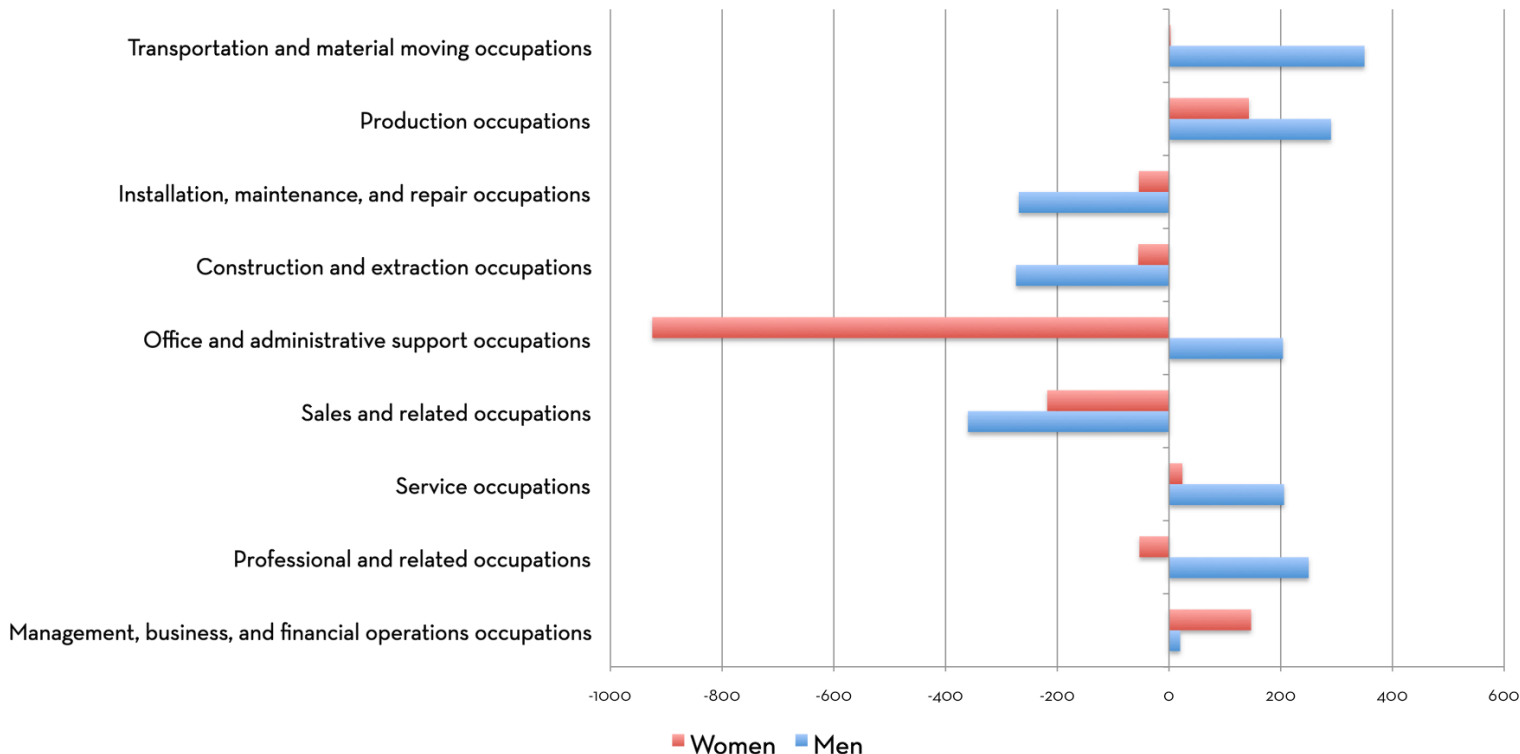
Americans have been working harder without seeing better pay or even new titles. *Mother Jones* recently reported that Americans put in an average 122 more hours than British workers and 378 more than Germans. As companies trim budgets, employers are “rationalizing” far more positions than usual. This leaves everyone else to pick up the remaining work.

There is more and more evidence that such a phenomenon is changing the American labor landscape. In a recent survey by Spherion Staffing, 53% of workers said they have taken on new roles. Just 7% got a raise or a bonus for doing so. Americans gave up 448 million earned but unused vacation days in 2010. If the average wage is \$39,208 for a full-time worker, that’s \$67.5 billion worth of time.

Meanwhile, quits have fallen dramatically during the recession and have stayed at a low rate (see Figure 4). The unemployed-to-job-opening ratio has stayed remarkably high. If the ability to quit one’s job acts as leverage for wage increases and proxy-wage increases like a more hospitable work atmosphere, then workers will be incapable of preventing greater workloads for no increases in compensation.

Another explanation has to do with long-term shifts in the economy. Due to automation, technology, and globalization, there is less demand for lower- to medium-skilled work. There is a considerable amount of literature that warns that jobs like these are vulnerable in the 21st century. As a percentage of the labor force, office and administrative support occupations are declining. However, there still is a major drop associated with this recession in terms of active levels.

Changes in Occupation, Total Jobs, June 2009 to June 2011 (Figure 1)

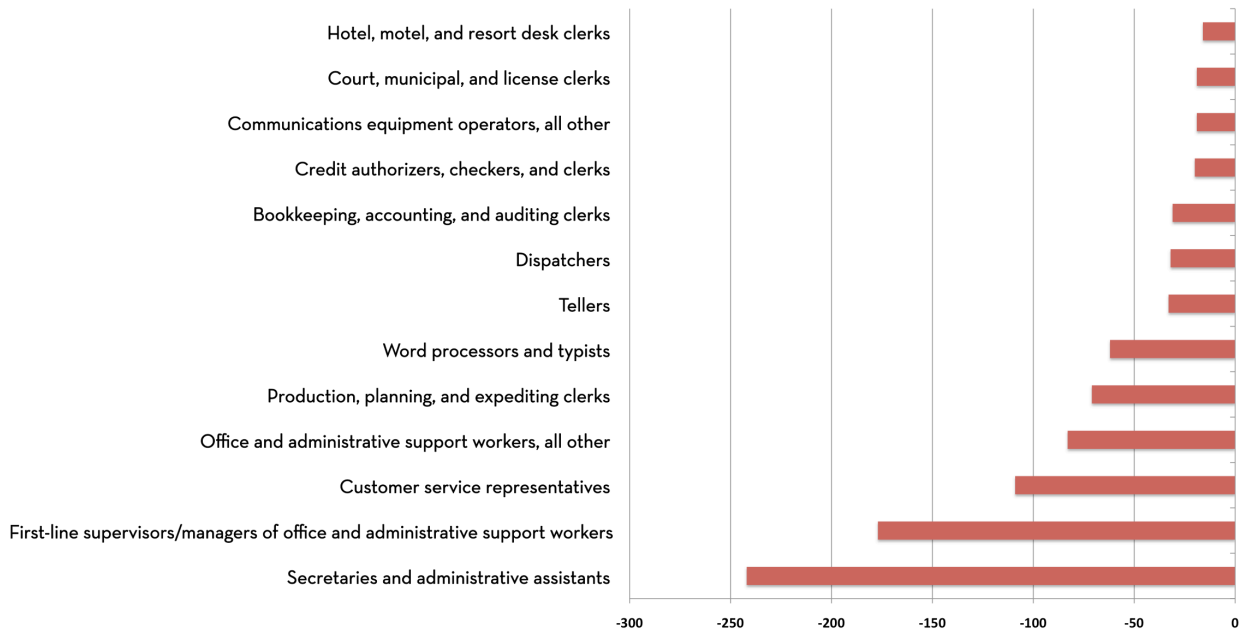


Changes in Occupations Since the End of the Recession, by Gender (Figure 2)

Occupation	Total People at Work	Total Men At Work	Total Women At Work	Percent Men in Occupation	Percent Women in Occupation	Employment Changes for Men	Employment Changes for Women
Management, business, and financial operations occupations	20671	11867	8804	57%	43%	20	147
Professional and related occupations	27255	12194	15061	45%	55%	250	-53
Service occupations	24232	10780	13452	44%	56%	206	24
Sales and related occupations	15388	7790	7598	51%	49%	-360	-218
Office and administrative support occupations	17644	4434	13210	25%	75%	204	-925
Construction and extraction occupations	7274	7090	184	97%	3%	-274	-55
Installation, maintenance, and repair occupations	4984	4773	211	96%	4%	-269	-54
Production occupations	7391	5323	2068	72%	28%	290	143
Transportation and material moving occupations	7885	6741	1144	85%	15%	350	3

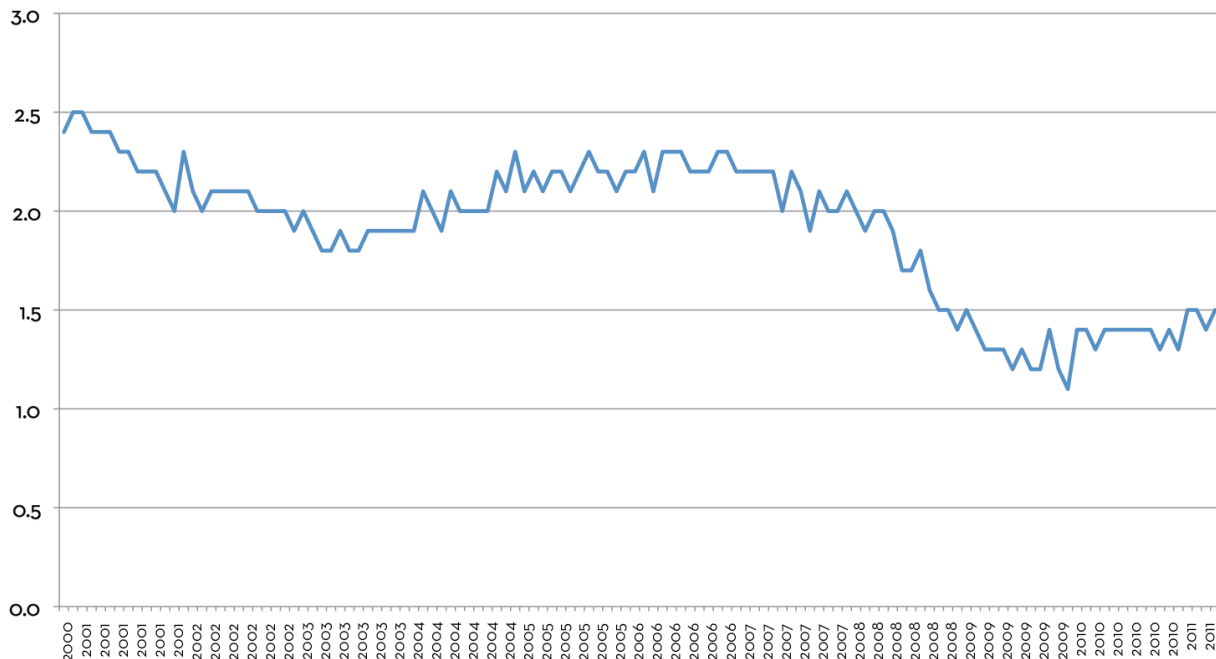
Sources: BLS, CPS, monthly data. Data is unadjusted, people at work.

Changes in Female Occupation Office and administrative support Occupations 2nd Quarter 2009 to 2nd Quarter 2011 (Figure 3)



Sources: BLS, CPS, quarterly data. Data is unadjusted.

The Rate At Which People Are Quitting Their Jobs Is Down (Figure 4)



Sources: BLS, JOLTS, monthly data, adjusted.

Potential Problems

There are two potential problems with this approach that, while noted, are unlikely to change the results. One is a product of noise in the data. The household surveys that make up the CPS are more random and noisy than the industry-level data in the CES. However, the results here are so dramatic and robust to different end points that there must be something going on in this worker category.

A second potential problem has to do with occupation creep. Since occupations are self-reported, it is possible that employees are doing the same work but giving themselves different titles. Especially in assistance work, it is easy to imagine a worker referring to herself as an administrator with no functional change in work duties. However, given the sharp change in employment levels for these occupations at the time of the recession, and the fact that there is no comparable increase found to offset the reported numbers, it is likely that this reflects real job loss.

Conclusions

There is likely a long-term structural change taking place in support staff roles in an ever-changing technological environment. Employees are much more likely to book their own travel and schedule meetings. Meanwhile, traditional administrative duties may change into higher-level work dealing with budgets and larger projects that will require more advanced training.

But in the short term, the devastating job market is going to continue driving job loss in this area. If the economy were creating a large number of jobs, workers would have more opportunities and leverage to demand a more limited portfolio of responsibilities. That would increase the demand for administrative assistants and foster a better work experience for all employees.

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Special thanks to Nekabari Goka for valuable research assistance, Lee Price, Karen Kosanovich, and Mary Bowler for comments, and Tim Price for editorial content.