A Brief History of Occupational Classification in the United States

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Federal and state statistical agencies place occupations into categories for the purpose of collecting, calculating, and disseminating data. This information is then used by researchers to understand the structure of labor markets; students to identify future careers; job seekers looking for work; employers wishing to hire workers and set salaries; and schools to identify educational and training programs. But did you ever wonder why these categories were created? Or how occupations and their titles have changed over time?

This article is first in a two-part series. This first article discusses the history of the United States’ occupational classification system. The second article will discuss how specific occupations have changed over time and how occupational titles in the United States differ from those of other countries.

The first American Decennial Census was conducted in 1790, but it wasn’t until the 1850 Decennial Census when occupational title was collected. At that time, only free men aged 15 years or older were asked their profession, occupation, or trade. By 1860, this question was expanded to include free women. In 1870, five years after the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery was ratified, the profession, occupation, or trade name was collected for all men and women aged 15 years or older (Exhibit 1).

In 1918 the United States Department of Labor (USDOL) published a set of pamphlets that listed some of the most common occupations at the time. The publications reflected America’s industrialized economy, and included occupations found in leather, paper, printing, and rubber goods manufacturing; metal working, construction, mining, and meatpacking; logging and flour, and saw mills; and railroad transportation and ship building. Each occupation included a description of the work, qualifications needed to do the job, and, in some instances, the amount and type of schooling needed (Exhibit 2). The purpose of these booklets, as described in the preface, was so “the prospective employee may be informed as to the nature of the work he will be expected to do.”

Originally each occupation was assigned a code word (Exhibit 3). For example, the code word for a miner working in metal mines was “meek.” So if an employee used the word “meek” in a sentence, he was communicating to the employer that he had the necessary qualifications and skills to do the job. It became especially tricky if an employee had the training necessary to do two or even three jobs; the advice given was to combine the code words into one.

Luckily the code words were discarded by the time the first edition of the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT)* was published in 1939 (Exhibit 4). The DOT was specifically written to help public employment offices place qualified workers into appropriate jobs, an especially important task needed in the wake of the Great Depression. To gather the information needed to write the DOT, government workers visited employers throughout the country, observed people working, and notated their tasks, skills, and abilities. Information was also gathered from trade and labor associations and organizations.

The DOT classified skills and job requirements for 17,452 occupations, most of them blue-
collar, and categorized them into skilled, semiskilled, and unskilled groups. Each occupation was assigned a numeric code for easy classification. Besides a job description, the DOT also listed alternative occupational titles and the industry in which the job was most commonly found.

During World War II, millions of Americans joined the military. To combat the domestic worker shortage, USDOL published Occupations Suitable for Women in 1942 to help place women in work that was previously done by men. Occupations were listed and classified into “War Occupations Suitable for Women” and “Nonwar Occupations Suitable for Women.” Jobs not suitable for women were those that required considerable physical strength or work in hazardous or other “working conditions unsuitable for women.”

The changing American economy and labor force was reflected in the occupations listed in later editions of the DOT. The second edition of the DOT, issued in March 1949, included new occupations in the plastics, paper and pulp, and radio manufacturing industries (Exhibit 5).

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, three brochures were published that provided information on “relatively new occupational areas.” The first publication, Occupations in Electronic Data-Processing Systems (Exhibit 6), released in January 1959, detailed 13 occupations that worked in this new field, but failed to mention the hiring requirements and qualifications for these jobs because they “have not yet been standardized.” This technology was so new that the publication included pictures of computing equipment (Exhibit 7) and a diagram illustrating the data process flow. A glossary, which defined such words as “computer” and “peripheral equipment,” was added to help the reader understand the new technological terms.

Selected Occupations Concerned with Atomic Energy and Technical Occupations in Research Design and Development Considered as Directly Supporting to Engineers and Physical Scientists were both printed in 1961 to help meet the increasing demand for technical workers needed in the military, air and space, energy, electronic, and other scientific industries.
Occupational titles in the DOT were rewritten to avoid sex and/or age connotations in 1975, nearly a decade after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 were passed. Age and gender identifying language, such as the use of “boy” or “girl” were eliminated, so the occupation of bus boy was changed to dining room attendant. Gender stereotyped language such as the use of “man” and “women”, or suffixes that denote gender, such as “-ess”, were changed to gender neutral titles. For example, airplane stewardess was replaced with airplane flight attendant; salesman was modernized to sales associate; and shoe repairman was changed to shoe repairer. Meter maid was changed to meter attendant, matron was changed to attendant, and the catchall occupational title of foreman was changed to supervisor.

The title of “master” was also eliminated. Occupational titles such as yardmaster, used in the railroad industry, was changed to yard manager. Clock and watch jobmaster was changed to watch manufacturing supervisor.

Shortly after the end of World War II the American economy started shifting from one focused on manufacturing to one that specialized in services (the peak year for employment in goods-producing industries in the United States was in 1979.) To reflect this change the first edition of the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) was written in 1977. Unlike the DOT, which characterized occupations by industry and work setting, the SOC categorized occupations based on the work performed and required skills, education, training, and credentials. The SOC also provided more occupational details in managerial, professional specialty, and technical occupations, and fewer in clerical and production fields.

By 1998 the SOC became the official occupational classification system used by government statistical agencies, thus making data collected from one survey comparable to data collected from another. The SOC is the current coding structure used in reporting occupational statistics, including those produced and published by the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions (NMDWS). It is also used in all career exploration websites, including the Occupational Information Network (O*NET), which replaced the DOT in 1998, and NMDWS’ own Career Solutions (www.NMCareerSolutions.com); Labor Analysis, Statistics, and Economic Research (LASER) website (https://laser.state.nm.us); and the New Mexico Workforce Connection Online System (www.jobs.state.nm.us).
Stay tuned for the second part of this article, which will look at how specific occupations have changed over time and how occupational titles in the United States differ from those of other countries.

References


