Representing Work: What The Office Teaches us about Creativity and the Organization

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REPRESENTING WORK: WHAT THE OFFICE TEACHES US ABOUT CREATIVITY AND THE ORGANIZATION

By

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REPRESENTING WORK: WHAT THE OFFICE TEACHES US ABOUT
CREATIVITY AND THE ORGANIZATION

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NBC’s situation comedy *The Office* reflects on the nature of workplace management in the 21st century. The show critiques a corporation that values conformity over individuality, while implying that promoting “creative” employees to upper management is not a credible alternative. *The Office* does this by focusing on Michael Scott (played by Steve Carell), a character whose unique creative working style makes him a great salesman but a poor manager. Michael’s character stands in contrast to Ryan Howard (B.J. Novak), who differs from Michael both in his approach to business and his success at it. *The Office* implies that creativity is a valuable asset for non-managerial workers, but creative management can be problematic. As workplaces continue to evolve, it is imperative to explore how creativity and bureaucracy co-exist. It may be unrealistic to expect creativity to saturate all aspects of professional life, but striking a balance between creativity and organization might be paramount in assuring job satisfaction and productivity for future generations of employees.
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Introduction

In the past decade both film and television have provided disconcerting portraits of work in modern society. The film *Office Space* and BBC sitcom *The Office* present the modern office as a stifling environment in which bored employees perform meaningless tasks that bring them little personal or professional satisfaction. Other films such as *Very Bad Things*, *American Beauty*, and *Fight Club* tangentially touch on this subject by portraying male characters that are frustrated and hindered by their white-collar jobs. In each of these films office work is portrayed as an absurd practice that involves repetitive tasks devoid of creativity.

The depiction of the modern office as an absurd environment that alienates its employees stands in stark contrast to the culture of work described in William Whyte’s 1956 social critique *The Organization Man*. This study of workers’ attitudes in the 1950’s concludes that employees during that time period placed faith in organizations and wanted to conform to their company cultures. These “organization men” were a homogenous group of middle-class white males, who found satisfaction and harmony from working for bureaucratic organizations. *The Organization Man* studied a specific moment in American history where belief in conformity ran strong throughout the country. Companies were set up as hierarchical bureaucracies that gave employees specific tasks that did not require much creative thought. Despite this dependence on routine, organization men enjoyed their job defined their identities through them. That’s not to say that they were not without neuroses or doubts about their role in society, and Whyte explores how sacrificing individuality in order to conform took a toll on many employees from this time period. *The Organization*
Man, however, paints that era as a time when people defined themselves through the organizations they belonged to instead of as unique individuals.

When the age of organization ended is unclear, but Richard Florida’s 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class* argues that our country has shifted away from the organizational model and moved towards an economy that is driven by creative individuals. According to Florida, today’s organizations value individuality, self-expression, and creativity instead of homogeneity, conformity, and the desire to fit in. This creative class is the norm setting class of our time much like much like Whyte’s organization men set the American temper in the 1950’s (Florida 9), and the creative ethos has replaced the Protestant ethic as the spirit that defines our age.

The American version of *The Office* reflects on the nature of corporate management in the 21st century by critiquing a corporation that values conformity over individuality while implying that promoting “creative” employees is not credible alternative. *The Office* does this by focusing on Michael Scott (played by Steve Carell), a character whose creative working style makes him a great salesman but a poor manager. In some ways Michael resembles Whyte’s “organization man” (1): he is a middle class white-male who has worked his entire professional career for one company to which he is fiercely loyal, and he believes that working for an organization is a mark of professional success. Michael’s identity is tied to his job as the manager of the Scranton branch of Dunder Mifflin, a corporation that retains many characteristics of the work culture described by Whyte. In this *Office* corporate management makes business decisions without input from non-managerial employees whose work consists of simple tasks devoid of creativity. For the most part, the
Scranton branch’s employees have accepted the dull nature of their jobs and willingly sacrificed their personal identities for the chance to work in a structured and uncreative environment.

Unlike the organization man and the employees he manages, Michael refuses to conform to his company’s way of conducting business, opting to instead develop his own ways of handling work. In *The Rise of the Creative Class* Richard Florida claims that creativity requires enough self-confidence to take risks and that it differs from intelligence (31). These characteristics apply to Michael, who is not a conventionally smart individual but exudes confidence when interacting with clients. *The Office* emphasizes that Michael’s unique approaches to work makes him a terrific salesman. In the episode “The Client,” Michael’s boss schedules a business meeting with an important client at a local hotel. Michael changes the meeting’s location to the neighborhood Chili’s where he convinces the client, over yellow margaritas and an Awesome Blossom appetizer, to extend his valuable contract with Dunder Mifflin. In the episode “The Convention,” Michael eschews business meetings at a corporate convention, opting to socialize instead. He meets a representative from Hammermill and proceeds to convince that company to allow Dunder Mifflin to sell their products.
These moments are never the focus of the episodes in which they occur, but they illustrate Michael’s value to his company.

Florida also claims, “creative work in fact is often downright subversive since it disrupts existing patterns of thought and life” (31). This qualification applies to Michael’s style of management, which is subversive in the way that it disrupts his employees’ daily routines and often undermines his office’s productivity. In the episode “Conflict Resolution” Michael disagrees with the company’s policy regarding how employees should express their work related grievances. He creates his own method, which ends up causing frustration amongst his employees, and a day of work is lost. The show implies that traditional model worked fine and Michael’s attempts at change made his office less productive.

As a result of his management style, Michael is passed over for promotion to corporate management at the end of season three. Dunder Mifflin opts to promote Ryan Howard (played by B.J. Novak), an employee who failed to make a single sale while working under Michael at the Scranton branch. The bureaucrats who run this organization view Ryan as worthy of joining their Professional Managerial Class
(Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich), because unlike Michael he possesses an MBA and is willing to conform to the company’s ways of conducting business. While Michael has attained success as a salesman, he cannot realistically expect to ever be promoted above his current pay grade because the organization he works for, like organizations in the past, views educational certification and conformity as the deciding factors in upward mobility.

Florida laments the fact that American corporations in the 1950s valued conformity over individuality and promoted employees based on their educational certification. He describes how the Victory Optical Plant his father once worked at came to prioritize education over practical experience when determining who was qualified for management positions (65-66). For Florida, Victory’s decision to hire inexperienced college graduates as managers represented a shift to what he refers to as “the deadly organizational age model” (66). In this model managers were given the opportunity to be creative, while non-managerial employees were not. The promotion of Ryan resembles the Victory Optical situation, because it involves an educated individual with little practical experience receiving the promotion an experienced employee, Michael, is denied.
In its current season *The Office* has critiqued the decision to promote Ryan by undermining his management skills and mocking his strategies for improving Dunder Mifflin. From starting a website to shooting a commercial Ryan’s solutions resemble the norm rather than the creative, and while his efforts have not brought production to a grinding halt, they have not drastically improved business either.

But *The Office* ultimately disagrees with the notion that a managerial class based on conformity is a bad for business by demonstrating that Michael’s unique approaches to management are often counterproductive. Promoting Ryan does not solve the company’s problems, but promoting Michael would have been worse. Michael’s desire to push the creative envelope in every aspect of work hinders his ability to manage his own branch, and it would prevent him from fitting in with Dunder Mifflin’s upper management. This group of men may no longer wear gray flannel suits, but they still adhere to a social ethic that values conformity over individual brilliance. *The Office* chooses to criticize this bureaucratic model of management while implying that promoting creative employees is not a viable solution. At Dunder Mifflin creativity is valuable on the front lines but not in the corner office, and a managerial class must exist even if its members are not creative or brilliant businessman.

*The Office* also emphasizes that creativity, not Michael’s social ineptness, is what disrupts his employees’ routines and his office’s productivity. In the episode “Survivor Man” Michael leaves Jim Halpert (played by John Krasinski) in charge of the office. Jim is an extremely likeable and charismatic employee, but when he flexes his creative muscles and changes how employees’ birthdays are celebrated, mass
disgruntlement ensues. Order is restored when Michael returns, and for once Michael represents the stability of the organization instead of the disruptive force of creativity.  

*The Office* never presents a solution to Dunder Mifflin’s management problem but critiques both the bureaucratic and creative approaches. The show teaches us that creativity is a valuable asset for non-managerial workers, but creative management can be problematic. As workplaces continue to evolve, it is imperative to explore how creativity and bureaucracy co-exist. It may be unrealistic to expect creativity to saturate all aspects of professional life, but striking a balance between creativity and organization might be paramount in assuring job satisfaction and productivity for future generations of employees.

In this thesis I will analyze *The Office* in respect to William Whyte’s *The Organization Man* and Richard Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class*. I will analyze three of the show’s characters: Michael, Ryan Howard, and Jim Halpert. By analyzing these characters I will demonstrate that *The Office* critiques a corporation that values conformity over entrepreneurship, while implying that promoting “creative” employees to upper management is not a credible alternative. It also implies that it is unrealistic to expect all aspects of professional to depend on creativity, and that like in the age of organization, upward mobility in modern corporations is based off educational certification instead of practical experience (Traube 277).

**Literature Review: Past Films and Scholarship**

Hollywood has a tradition of depicting office life dating back to silent films such as King Vidor’s *The Crowd* (1928), a story about a young couple’s struggle to find happiness in an impersonal metropolis. The male protagonist John ‘Johnny’ Sims
(played by James Murray) works a desk job at a large company, and through the cinematography Vidor implies that his white-collar existence is depersonalized. John is just another face in the crowd and struggles to find a personal identity in both his professional and private lives.

In the 1950’s a number of films focusing on corporate America were released. The 1955 teleplay *Patterns* focused on life in an office. This story of an up and coming executive’s struggle to adjust to his company’s ruthless ways of conducting business (Gould par7) was performed live on the *Kraft Television Theatre* on January 15. It received such rave reviews that NBC scheduled another live performance on February 9, which was unprecedented for teleplays. A feature film based on the
teleplay was released in 1956. The most important office film of the 1950’s was *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956). Adapted from the Sloan Wilson novel of the same name, this film follows protagonist Tom Rath’s (played by Gregory Peck) as he attempts to find meaning in his corporate existence.

In the film’s first act Rath takes a job at the United Broadcasting Corporation to garner a higher salary so he and his wife can afford to move their family to an affluent Connecticut suburb. His new boss Ralph Hopkins (played Frederich March) is a hard working executive, whose penchant for staying at the office late into the night has isolated him from his family. Hopkins favors Rath, because unlike other UBC employees, who are too afraid to speak their minds, Rath gives Hopkins honest feedback and is not afraid to express his opinion at work. At the film’s conclusion, Hopkins calls Rath and asks if he would to accompany him on a business trip that will require Rath to leave town for a few days. Rath refuses by saying that it is more important for him to spend time with his family than travel on business. Rath sees himself as a 9 to 5 worker and does not want to follow in Hopkins footsteps by sacrificing time with his family for the good of his organization. This scene implies that unlike Hopkins, whose ambition at a young age lead him to his current position, Rath will not seek promotion at UBC because he believes that it will keep him from spending enough time from his family. Rath is happy with the balance he has struck between his work and personal life, and he sees ow reason to disrupt it.

The film is very interesting in how it depicts Rath’s approaches to work. Unlike Whyte’s organization man, Rath refuses sacrifice his individual identity and is unafraid to disagree with his boss. This attitude makes Rath stand out amongst a
group of “yes men” who are unwilling to criticize the company’s way of conducting business. But like Whyte’s organization man, Rath is not interested in climbing the corporate ladder. He does not want to take an executive position that will give him more power and autonomy in his career. Rath sees his job as a means of providing a nice suburban lifestyle for his family; he has no interest in being an entrepreneur and possibly losing touch with his family as a result.

Billy Wilder’s *The Apartment* (1960) depicts a protagonist who attempts to gain promotion by catering to his boss’ every desire. C.C. Bud Baxter (played by Jack Lemmon) becomes depressed after his efforts lead him nowhere, and he ends up quitting his job because he can’t stand to work for men who use their employees’ efforts for personal gain. *The Apartment* paints a very cynical view of corporate life in which companies are run by immoral bosses and non-managerial employees stand little chance of achieving promotion.

The tone of *Patterns, The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, and *The Apartment* differs from the tone of office films from the past decade. In each of the films from the 1950s, characters hope to find some sort of redemption or personal satisfaction
through working for an organization. There hopes are not always fulfilled, but their struggles are partly defined by the optimism they feel about working for an organization. In “The Celluloid Cubicle,” Latham Hunter argues that a new genre of film that he labels “office movies” emerged in the 1990’s. He argues this genre features films about disempowered white-males whose white-collar jobs have turned them into drones of the “new corporatized, managerial late capitalist culture” (72). He lists films such as *Falling Down* (1993), *In the Company of Men* (1997), *Very Bad Things* (1998), *American Beauty* (1999), *Office Space* (1999), *Being John Malkovich* (1999), and *Fight Club* (2000) as members of this genre and argues that their narratives respond to the current crisis of masculinity through depictions of work and male representation. Unlike the films from the fifties, the films in Hunter’s genre portray working for the organization in a very pessimistic way and escaping this sort of existence is the only way for the main characters to find happiness. White-collar work is depicted as an emasculating presence in its male characters’ lives, and in order to reclaim their masculinity the characters must break out of their metaphorical cubicles by quitting their jobs. This escape happens differently, and while each film presents white-collar work as emasculating, Hunter is not always satisfied by the films’ resolutions to this problem.

While this thesis will not examine how work may or may not emasculate men or contribute to our culture’s crisis of masculinity – if we even have one – Hunter’s paper provides an effective starting point for my scholarship because it identifies a group of films that present white-collar work in the same vein as *The Office*. Hunter argues “some critics have also written about a crisis of masculinity which came about
with the Industrial Revolution and the creation of the PMC (professional managerial class)” (74). This culture of management has helped alienate workers from the idea of producing something, “a worker on an assembly line has no contact with his finished product, nor with his fellow workers; his work is compartmentalized” (Hunter 74). *The Office*, like the films on Hunter’s list, addresses this type of alienation. The show’s characters are not producers; they are middlemen and women in the paper industry. Much of their displeasure comes from the fact that their days are spent making photocopies and filling out expense reports instead of developing business strategy or producing something tangible. These employees suffer as a result of being alienated from the product of their supposed “work”.


The poster for *Office Space* sums up its pessimistic views towards modern office culture

In “The Paper Chase” Tad Friend forwards parts of Hunter’s argument by claiming that popular depictions of office life have contributed to the notion that in a typical office, “work has no inherent value” (par 2). He cites the comic strip “Dilbert” as influential in establishing the blueprint for this representation. Friend goes on to argue that one of the richest treatments of this problem is BBC’s sitcom *The Office*, which is comprised of twelve episodes and a two-hour Christmas special that aired between 2001 and 2002 and foregrounds the idea that work in the modern organization has become meaningless. In BBC’s *The Office* workers “wear muted
blues and grays and seem to be drowning in queasy fluorescence” (Friend par 4), and Friend argues, “This office taps home the point that work is fundamentally alien to the workplace” (par 17).

One important difference between BBC’s *The Office* and Hunter’s “Office Movies” is the style in which they were shot. The office movies were shot with an invisible camera, while *The Office* was shot as a mock documentary. Its camera imitates the fly on the wall approach to documentary filming first featured in Cinema-Verite, and its characters are aware of its presence. In each episode a mobile camera follows its subjects around and interviews conducted with characters are spliced into the action. Friend argues this style aided the show’s depiction of white-collar work as meaningless because, “the show’s format compounded the gloom, because our emotions weren’t being cued with pop-song hooks or jolted by a laugh track” (par 4) and “by placing the cameras right up in the action, the show allowed us to discover the characters for ourselves” (par 4). Friend draws an interesting comparison between BBC’s *Office* and the NBC spin-off, but he simplifies their differences by claiming NBC’s *Office* is a more upbeat version, “Scranton is Slough on Zoloft.”

BBC’s *The Office*’s relative brevity – twelve half-hour episodes are half of an American sitcom’s full season – made it more of a snapshot of office life as only four of its characters received enough screen time to be fully developed. NBC’s *The Office* has already completed over fifty episodes, and as a result it has developed more relevant characters and more themes.

There are two pieces of literature that focus on BBC’s *The Office*. In “What have you ever done on the telly?”: The Office, (post) reality television and (post)
work” Tara Brabazon argues BBC’s *The Office* has translated the boredom, banality and the pettiness of office life into comedy (103). Brabazon also argues that the show highlights “the mismatching of the new corporate capitalism with the language of team-building and flexible employment” (109) and that despite an attempt on the part of economies to increase individual creativity, many workers are still tethered to jobs that require much repetitive labor (109). The show’s characters resent their jobs because they lack any sort of creativity or stimulation.

In “Management in/as Comic Relief: Queer Theory and Gender Performativity in *The Office*” Melissa Tyler and Laurie Cohen argue that BBC’s *The Office* parodies management’s configuration according to the terms of Judith Butler’s ‘heterosexual matrix’, and this representation critiques how this configuration affects average organizational encounters (118). Their work examines the main character played by Ricky Gervais and argues his desire for recognition is an underpinning in the hegemonic performance of gender. They claim BBC’s *Office* mocks the management of contemporary organizational life, but the show’s fatal flaw is that it does not present a ‘better’ way to approach management.

This thesis will be the first scholarship to focus on NBC’s *The Office*, although Richard Edwards mentions the show in his published article “New to You?: NBC’s *The Office* and the Remake of a Cult British Hit TV Series.” This thesis will build on some of the ideas presented in the aforementioned literature and use them to prove its main points. Like previous films *The Office* foregrounds the absurdity of the modern office, which it portrays as a stifling environment in which employees work uncreative jobs.
This situation comedy critiques a corporation that values conformity over individuality, but the show implies that promoting “creative,” individualistic employees to upper management is not credible alternative. It also argues that like in the age of organization, upward mobility is based off educational certification instead of practical experience. Main character Michael Scott retains facets of the organization man but also exudes creativity in his work and is very much an individual. Michael’s complex personality allows him to achieve great success at his branch but prevents him from achieving promotion within his corporation. The show also presents secondary characters Ryan Howard and Jim Halpert in ways that reinforce the unstated arguments that spring from Michael’s character.

The Organization Man

In *The Organization Man* social critic William Whyte argues that post-World War II American business culture shifted away from the protestant ethic and its belief in self-reliance and entrepreneurship in favor of a bureaucratic social ethic founded upon loyalty, security, and belongingness. This radical shift in American ideology occurred in large corporations such as General Electric and Sears Roebuck, who at the time were emerging as cornerstones of the American economy and had come to value employee-friendly servants over goal-centered individuals and “white-collar lieutenants” of industry over entrepreneurs (Kratz par 4). These organization men placed absolute faith in large organizations, were a homogenous group that resided in bedroom communities such as Park Forest, Illinois, and viewed life as a “progression through predictable stages” (LaBarre 66). Their loyalty to the organization and hard work was rewarded with job security and the possibility of a slow climb up the
corporate ladder. Reaching upper management, however, was not guaranteed. Employers wanted their employees not only to work hard but be “damn good fellows to boot” (Postrel par 4). The notion of job-hopping for one’s personal gain was looked upon as gauche, and loyalty to “the organization” was considered paramount (Postrel par 5).

This ideological shift and emphasis on loyalty resulted in a team oriented way of approaching work that sacrificed individual input for group involvement. Personnel training for new recruits became a staple in large corporations, and creative leadership became a staff function. Ideas about business strategy were developed in groups instead of being offered up by individuals. Executives and managers had to be well-rounded men who fostered a committee way of functioning. Fitting into the organization became paramount, and employees came to value human understanding over individual brilliance.

Whyte described the social ethic that the organization man subscribed to as a utopian faith with a real moral imperative behind it. Organization men believed in their work and believed that accepting the social ethic would lead to a whole-hearted sense of satisfaction. Success could not be found by bucking the system and striking out one one's own. Unlike heroes of popular fiction, organization men could not find success by leaving the established arena so they bought into the culture of loyalty large corporations nurtured. College graduates were no longer urged to strike out on their own and work their way to the top. They were urged to commit to an organization and conform to that organization’s established culture.
Depending on one’s point of view, Whyte’s portrayal was either damming or comforting. The America he portrayed offered middle class white males a surefire equation for success, although it required that they sacrifice individual brilliance in order to conform to an established system. The career path of the organization man was mapped out for him – work hard, answer to authority, and you would be taken care of (Kratz par 6). The corporations that Whyte’s men worked for superseded individual brilliance by favoring a committee approach to work, in which ideas were developed in a group environment. Organization men were urged to work but not to think and even those who held high ranking jobs were directed to only work on specific tasks (Florida 64). Whyte viewed organization men in a slightly pessimistic light and claimed this ideological shift had turned man into “an isolated meaningless unit” (25).

While The Organization Man argued that this new type of employee was a facet of the era of the organization, Whyte also points out that certain discrepancies occurred in this time period, bringing into question whether the era of the organization was more a myth than a reality. For example, the average number of jobs a man held in his lifetime was greater in the 1950’s than it was pre-World War II America. The era of the organization was supposed to be a time when workers eschewed job-hopping and chose one company at which they would spend their entire careers (Postrel par 5). But holding multiple jobs actually increased in this time period, thereby questioning the validity of this assertion. Whyte also states that while conformity and fitting in to a company’s culture was presented as paramount, “organizations remain places where success comes to those motivated by old
individualist, competitive drives” (Whyte 156). Young men could still climb the corporate ladder through hard work and individual brilliance.

The extent to which the organization man and the corporation that valued him existed and how long this time period lasted is debatable. However, the idea of the organization man remains fixed in our cultural thinking and presents a somewhat idealized vision of the past. Supposedly, this was as an era when a man could garner a career simply by pledging his loyalty to a company. In our current economy where outsourcing and downsizing are common terms, the era of the organization can seem strangely comforting. Individuals from both political parties have expressed a desire to return the security of the past. Conservative Pat Buchanan misses “the kind of social stability, rootedness … we all used to know” while liberal sociologist Richard Sennet wrote a book about “new capitalism” called “The Corrosion of Character”, in which he laments the fact that workers in the new capitalism are regarded as disposable (Postrel par 8).

The idea of the organization man also has a place in our culture. In The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, Gregory Peck’s character tells a pair of corporate recruiters, “You can hardly expect me to switch jobs purely for the pleasure of working for UBC.” He wants a higher salary and is willing to hold out for it. In her article entitled “The Gray Flannel Office”, Ellen Kratz claims this sort of rebuke would have been shocking at the time of the film’s release (par 1). Gregory Peck’s character was a type of employee who put personal gain over organizational gain and refused to bow down to the established system. Whether Kratz believes Peck’s rebuke would have been shocking because most employees in that decade were good organization men or most
films from that era were predicated on the idea that men in that time period were good organization man is unclear, but many business scholars claim that this type of employee is common in today’s workplace where companies value flexibility and goal centered employees (Postrel par 7).

Claiming the organization man is completely extinct may be extreme since it would ignore certain realities of today's business world. In an article published in the August 2007 edition of Business Week, Peter Coy argues that in today's corporate environment individualism may carry a higher premium but hierarchy is still an indispensable way of getting things done (58). Whether modern corporations in the new economy have a place for loyal individuals willing to adapt to their ways of doing things, or “goal-centered” employees with individualist tendencies is uncertain (Postrel par 11).

The Rise of the Creative Class

*The Organization Man* focused on a specific moment in American history, and today’s organizations exist in a new economy dictated by different realities. By the mid-seventies the sure-thing corporate job was no longer a sure thing as economic stagnation and foreign competition changed the way American corporations did business (Kratz par 11). Between 1979 and 1995, 43 million jobs were lost to downsizing, which nullified the idea that loyalty to a company would result in economic stability for life (Conger par 53). Corporations came to realize “that the organization man was too expensive” (Kratz par 11). As a result corporations began to value flexibility and began substituting “creative destruction” for lifelong conformity (Postrel par 7). Men and women of the baby boomer generation and
subsequent generations sought their fortunes through “adaptability, entrepreneurship and job hopping” (Postrel par 7). Young employees now expect to have three to five different employers during their careers, and the “core” worker, with full-time, permanent employment is slowly being replaced by flexible employees (Harvey 152).

Philosophies about the nature of work have evolved. In one speech former Federal Reserve Board chairman Alan Greenspan claimed workers would need to combine technical know-how with the ability to create, analyze, and transform information while effectively interacting with others (Brabazon 110). In his book entitled *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida claims, “But what’s more fundamentally true is that we now have an economy powered by human creativity” (4). Florida claims that in today’s professional environment, companies benefit from hiring “creative” employees.

Florida argues that like Whyte’s managerial class, which “set the American temper” in the 1950s, the Creative Class is the norm-setting class of our time (9), and an increase in creativity is leading to no-collar workplace that feature new forms of self-management, peer recognition and pressure and intrinsic forms of motivation instead of hierarchical bureaucracy (13). While Florida celebrates the rise of creativity, he also warns that a focus on individuality has lead members of the creative class to isolate themselves, and as a result this new class has not been able to develop a sense of awareness (315). Florida goes on to imply that this lack of a group identity could prove problematic as our society attempts to meet the challenges of modern society.

**Putting things into Perspective**
Conformity, belongingness, openness, creativity: these buzz words saturate both *The Organization Man* and *The Rise of the Creative Class*, and they are key components of each book’s arguments. Unfortunately, their exact meanings are never clearly defined. Both Whyte and Florida use empirical data to arrive at their conclusions, but they also rely on these buzz words to define the time periods they describe. The lack of clarity surrounding words such as “conformity” and “creativity” can make it hard to discern exactly what each book is trying to say.

In *The Organization Man*, Whyte illustrates that job hopping actually increased post World War II, bringing into question whether this actually was a time period when men planned on spending their entire careers working for a single company. He cites several studies that indicate personnel changes in management jobs increased after World War II (179). He also cites a study of 422 executives who changed jobs that indicates most job switches occurred because the chance of advancement was blocked (181). The idea that men were switching jobs because they could not obtain promotion contradicts the portrayal of this period as a time when men did not care about promotion as much as having a steady job and conforming to a company’s culture. Perhaps organization men were not completely willing to sacrifice their ambition in order to conform to a company’s established ethos.

In *The Rise of the Creative Class* Florida argues that creativity has saturated fields such as medicine, law, science, engineering, and business without ever effectively defining the word that his entire book is based off. He gives certain qualifications but never sums up the difference between a creative worker and a non-creative worker in succinct manner. At some points in his book it seems like
“creativity” could be replaced with “individuality” without changing the meaning, because almost all of Florida’s creative workers have very specific, individual tendencies and want to work for companies that allow them to express themselves.

In this thesis I will examine *The Office*’s with respect to both *The Organization Man* and *The Rise of the Creative Class*, and while I will illustrate how *The Office* reflects themes from both these works it is important to maintain a critical eye with respect to both book’s arguments. My take on both *The Organization Man* and *The Rise of the Creative Class* is that they accurately capture the spirit of the time periods they examine, even if every nuance of their arguments is not absolutely clear.

The 1950’s were a time period where people wanted to conform and define themselves through the organizations they belonged to, even if the act of conforming was not as fulfilling as they expected and might cause them anxiety. Currently our culture is driven by people who want to express themselves as individuals and find creative ways to do so. *The Office* depicts a workplace where creativity and conformity clash, and as a result the workplace is not managed in an efficient manner.

In my first chapter, I will examine *The Office*’s depiction of Dunder Mifflin as the organization. Through this depiction the show satirizes organizational nuances such as personnel training and the attempts of management to force congeniality among employees who share little in common other than a communal carpet. I will also describe the show’s premise and the chief conflicts that are presented in the first episode. I will examine how the show specifically foregrounds the alienation and dissatisfaction of its workers and compare its depiction to similar depictions in the films *Office Space, Fight Club,* and *American Beauty*. My next three chapters will be
devoted to examining the three characters I have already mentioned. I will analyze the roles Michael Scott, Ryan Howard, and Jim Halpert play in the show and illustrate how these characters influence show’s unstated arguments about the modern organization. After analyzing these characters, I will examine one episode that involves a corporate promotion and analyze how the show’s decision to promote one character over the others illustrates its argument about how the modern workplace resembles the organizations Whyte described and upward mobility is dependent upon education rather than practical experience or job performance.
Chapter 1: Dunder Mifflin Scranton: The organization

“Listen Scott, the Scranton Branch is no longer financially viable. We’re losing money. It’s not a charity it’s a business and it’s a dying business. The whole business model of the small regional paper company simply doesn’t make sense anymore.” – Dwight Schrute (Daniels and Gervais 2006).

Dwight Schrute (played by Rainn Wilson) says this to his boss Michael Scott while pretending to be Dunder Mifflin CEO David Wallace. In the context in which it is delivered the line is meant to be funny, but it accurately sums up the predicament Dunder Mifflin, and more specifically the Scranton Branch that Michael manages, faces on a daily basis. Dunder Mifflin is a mid-level paper supply company struggling to compete with national chains such as Staples, whose size and reach allows them to sell similar products at cheaper prices. Scranton is a regional branch of Dunder Mifflin and may be shutdown as the company re-thinks its business plan. The series’ first episode, “The Office: An American Workplace”, sets up the show’s premise: a documentary film crew will record the daily activities of an office that may be closed in the near future. In that episode, Michael Scott’s corporate boss Jan Levinson (played by Melora Hardin), tells him that the board can no longer justify having both a Scranton Branch and a Stamford Branch, and that one branch will eventually be closed.

This premise illustrates that Dunder Mifflin cannot afford to extend job security to loyal employees as the economics of their situation is forcing them to close one of two branches. The premise also begs the question: how can a small regional branch compete with national chains that sell similar products at cheaper prices? Dunder Mifflin cannot offer lower prices but believes it can compete through superior customer service. If Dunder Mifflin is to compete with larger chains, its
salesmen will have to convince local clients to choose customer service over lower prices.

**An American Workplace**

The series’ first episode is titled, “The Office: An American Workplace” but the Scranton office cannot be considered an average American workplace. It is a small office located in a small town, and the chains against which it is competing against are closer in terms of size to the type of organizations Whyte examined in *The Organization Man*. While a small office is a vastly different type of organization than a national corporation, Richard Florida argues, “organizations of all sizes have a distinct role to play in the creative economy” (22). Therefore, examining the trends that take place in small organization can reveal tendencies about the nature of modern work. The show’s premise, in which a documentary crew chooses a small office to film, reinforces this notion. While the motivations of the crew are never revealed, they would not have chosen this location if they deemed it irrelevant.

Like films such as *Office Space* and *Fight Club*, *The Office* does not depict a workplace filled with employees performing creative tasks at flexible hours of employment. A sense of the traditional pervades the Scranton office as employees work from 9 am to 5 pm without exception. They spend their days performing basic and repetitive tasks such as making photocopies. They attend staff meetings and training sessions that teach them little about their job but instead instruct them in how to function as a member of the organization. The opening title sequence juxtaposes shots of the main characters with shots of the copy machine, the water cooler, and a paper shredder.
This montage implies that workers are trapped performing mindless tasks instead of performing challenging, creative jobs that might fulfill them. A general sense of malaise permeates the work environment, and employees appear less than happy in their professions.

The Dunder Mifflin office more closely resembles the offices described by C. Wright Mills in his 1953 book *White Collar* than a workplace that depends on creative employees. Like Whyte, Mills argued that during the 1940’s and 50’s an increase in bureaucracy created a centralization of knowledge in organizations (Traube 277. Creative decisions about business were made by a small group of upper level management personnel, and other employees were relegated to menial tasks that did not require much creative thought (Traube 277). The transition into the organization age was premised on breaking down tasks into simple components (Florida 62).

So while *The Office* is set in the present when according to Florida creativity is the driving force of our economy, it closely resembles organizations of the past. Michael makes all the decisions pertaining to business strategy, and his employees
execute his wishes. Business is conducted over the phone, where as technological devices such as computers are simply used for interoffice emails and spreadsheets (Brabazon 110). Employees rarely demonstrate innovation. The promise of stimulation at work is replaced with the reality of performing repetitive tasks. This mismatch was present in BBC’s original series, and the show implies that the lack of mental stimulation at work is a source of dissatisfaction among the characters.

Employees at the Scranton branch emphasize the boring nature of their jobs during interviews and other moments. In the series’ first episode Jim Halpert gets bored mid-interview while describing his job, “I’m boring myself just talking about this.” His daily routine of talking to representatives from other companies about whether Dunder Mifflin can supply them with the paper they need is boring, and his plight exemplifies the dissatisfaction Dunder Mifflin employees feel from their work. They are not engaged in any sort of creative tasks, and their work does not bring them professional satisfaction.

Other Depictions

Previous films and television shows also depict of white-collar work as frustrating and unfulfilling. In the 1998 film Office Space, working for a corporation is a painful experience filled with mindless tasks, annoying co-workers, and smarmy bosses. Main character Peter Gibbons (played by Ron Livingston) spends his days filling out spreadsheets and finding new ways to kill time before the clock strikes five. He never participates in developing any sort of business strategy but is lectured by his boss because of clerical mistakes he makes on daily reports. As part of his company’s attempts to streamline its efficiency, he and his co-workers are at risk to
lose their jobs. Peter ends up leaving the white-collar world to take a job as a construction worker, a solution that is somewhat problematic because it would mean a different salary and therefore a possible lifestyle change. The film doesn’t address the economics of Peter’s situation but ends with Peter expressing happiness over his newfound work while his former co-workers leave for their new jobs at another corporation.

The stifling nature of white-collar work is the chief focus of Office Space, but other films tangentially touch on this subject. In both Fight Club and American Beauty, two prominent films from 1999, white-collar work jobs frustrate and hinder each film’s main character, both of whom suffer as a result of their jobs. Each character only obtains personal salvation after quitting his and thereby ceasing to exist as corporate drones. In Fight Club, the narrator (played by Edward Norton) believes he has become a slave to consumer culture and is working a job he despises so he can function as a consumer, “Like so many others I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct.” At his job, company lingo dominates his conversations, “You want me to de-prioritize my current reports until you advise of a status upgrade?” He suffers insomnia and describes his existence as if everything he perceives is a “copy of a copy.” This voice over occurs while a picture of a copy machine appears on screen. His insomnia leads him to start a fight club, in which members fight each other as a way of breaking out of their daily apathy. The narrator eventually quits his job and devotes his life to expanding his fight club. The club spins out of control eventually jeopardizing his life. The film does not offer any definitive conclusion about whether white-collar work caused the narrator’s problems, but for the majority
of the film it is portrayed as a stifling activity that keeps him from personal fulfillment.

In *American Beauty*, main character Lester’s (played by Kevin Spacey) sales job is portrayed as stifling. Early in the film, Lester undergoes a personal transformation that resulting in an increase in self-confidence. After this occurs, Lester learns that he must defend his job to his company’s efficiency expert because his company is looking to let some employees go. During the interview, he loses his temper because the idea of defending himself to a company that he has loyally served for years enrages him. He quits his job and manipulates company politics into a handsome severance package. He begins working in a fast food restaurant and finds serving burgers more satisfying than working in a cubicle.

While these films depict white-collar work as trivializing and emasculating, their solutions are problematic. The main characters resolve their dislike of work by simply quitting their jobs, a solution that most individuals could not feasibly pursue. *The Office* offers a more complex and complete critique of white-collar work. This is partly due to the fact that television is a better medium than film to explore the trials and tribulations of professional life. A three act structured story with a definitive conclusion cannot express the omnipresent nature of work as well as a television show, whose 24 episodes feel more like a full time commitment that a job requires. *The Office*’s characters cannot quit the white-collar world for jobs in fast food joints or construction companies because they presumably have expenses that necessitate them making a certain amount of money. The characters weigh the consequences of staying at Dunder Mifflin or going somewhere else, but their choices are must meet
the realities of their lives. Simply quitting and entering lower paying professions is not an option.

**Satirizing Organizational Nuances**

The show satirizes certain organizational nuances that further reduce employees’ jobs into the simplest common denominators. Personnel training, which *The Organization Man* argues was prominent 1950’s organizations, is often satirized. Scranton employees are forced to sit through a Diversity Day training session that presents the acronym HERO (Honesty, Empathy, Respect, Openness) as a solution to any racial based conflict that might occur at the workplace. Similar training sessions on women in the workplace, conflict resolution, and sexual harassment are presented as simplistic and silly. The idea that professional men and women need to be instructed on office interaction is presented as ludicrous, but the organization seems intent on instructing employees about every aspect of office life. During a seminar about women in the workplace, one character expresses her frustration by telling the camera crew she feels “insulted” that as a professional woman she has to be subjected to this sort of nonsense. Dunder Mifflin has no interest in encouraging any sort of creative thought or interesting discussion about daily life in an office, it simply wants employees to follow regimented procedures and try to fit the molds they are cast into.

Ironically, we never see office members receive group training on how to sell paper, which is the one thing they need to accomplish to prevent downsizing. The art of the sale seems secondary to the art of learning how to operate within the organization. The show also mocks the forced congeniality that offices sometime attempt to foster through holiday parties and other forced social gatherings. These
gatherings occur with such frequency that the company forms a “Party Planning Committee” headed by Angela (played by Angela Martin), who demonstrates a bit too much enthusiasm and gives every minor detail of each party an inappropriate amount of attention. Ironically the Party Planning Committee is the only forum in which the show depicts women taking a leadership role. The show’s most prominent female character is Pam (played by Jenna Fischer) the office receptionist. Her dream of working as an artist is hindered by her apparent lack of talent. Several other women work in the office, but they are treated like window dressing and none are shown to be particularly good at their job.

**Conclusion**

The Scranton Branch of Dunder Mifflin is a small organization. Despite its size, it is part of the modern economy and should embrace creativity if it is to succeed (Florida 22). Dunder Mifflin Scranton, however, does not encourage creativity, which by its definition would disrupt the bureaucracy. Its employees spend their days engaged in uncreative, repetitive tasks. The office closely resembles the bureaucracies described by C. Wright Mills and William Whyte, in which management made business decisions and employees carried out assigned tasks. Employees are trained in how to fit in at the workplace but not in the art of selling. The organization has no interest in promoting creative thought but seeks to break down every aspect of office life into simplistic terms.
Chapter 2: Michael Scott as the creative organization man

“Business is always personal. It’s the most personal thing in the world.” – Michael Scott (Daniels and Gervais 2007).

Upon a first viewing of *The Office*, it would be easy to write Michael Scott off as a caricature. He lacks conventional business knowledge, and his managerial style frustrates his employees. The show’s humor is often derived from watching Michael try to navigate out of the awkward situations that he creates. In season one, Michael arranges an early birthday celebration for Meredith (played by Kate Flannery) and proceeds to embarrass her with a string of tasteless jokes. In season two, he takes his branch on a ‘Booze Cruise’ in the middle of winter and is relegated to the ship’s brig for failing to obey the captain. In season three, he outs a gay co-worker, Oscar (played by Oscar Nunez) while attempting to promote gay rights and tries to make up for this misstep by kissing Oscar to prove that he is gay friendly. These sorts of moments occur often and illustrate Michael’s lack of social grace and his strong desire to form social relationships with his co-workers. Michael spends more time at work cracking jokes than overseeing business. He describes himself as a friend first and then a boss. His workers do not always share his sentiment, and employees, who would rather be allowed to punch their time cards in peace than be subjected to a boss who wants to constantly entertain them, often meet Michael’s antics with frustration.

However *The Office* makes it clear that while Michael social ineptness often goes hand in hand with his creativity, and the show illustrates that his skills as a salesman and a leader should be taken seriously. His managerial style frustrates his employees but is affirmed by important characters at key moments, and the show foregrounds his prowess as a salesman. For example, in the series’ first episode...
Michael learns that Jim, despite a strong sales record from the previous quarter, cannot close a sale to the local library. Michael calls him into his office and says, “So you’ve come to the master for guidance? Is this what you’re saying grasshopper? Let me show you how it’s done. Michael then proceeds to pick up the phone and call the library. The camera cuts to a shot of the office, and in this interval it is reasonable to assume that if a strong salesman like Jim could not close the sale, a manager who addresses an employee as “grasshopper” will not have better luck. But when the scene returns to Michael’s office, he is busy closing the sale that Jim could not. He wraps up the conversation by thanking “the gentleman” on the phone, before realizing he’s been speaking to a woman the entire time.

Within these few minutes the show emphasizes that Michael is good at closing tough sales and demonstrates his penchant awkward social interactions. The show strives to strike a balance between Michael’s gaffs and his valuable business maneuvers. What makes Michael such an interesting character is that he closely resembles Whyte’s organization man but is also the branch’s most creative employee. His loyalty to Dunder Mifflin seems antiquated, but his creativity makes him seem more modern than his employees. His creativity also pushes him to develop his own managerial style that often annoys his employees, who seem too jaded to try and accept a manager who wants to be creative. Michael is simultaneously an organization man, a stooge, a prolific salesman, and a creative manager, Michael is the character through whom show satires the notion that creativity is an essential part of the modern economy. I will start by examining how Michael Scott resembles the organization man.
The Organization Man

Of all the characters Michael Scott most closely fits the mold of William Whyte’s organization man. He is a middle class white male who has worked his entire professional career under the employment of one company to which he is fiercely loyal. He lives in a suburban condominium complex. He has no desire to strike out on his own but views working for the organization as an ambitious career goal. He is loyal to Dunder Mifflin and expects loyalty from those around him. While he attempts to befriend employees, Michael maintains a hierarchical command structure at the Scranton office that resembles the power structure that was common in the organization age. Michael makes all business decisions without much input from anyone else. His actions are always motivated by a genuine belief that they will help the company and its employees to whom he is very loyal.

Like the organization man, Michael finds harmony through working for the organization and his identity is tied to Dunder Mifflin. Whyte described Organization Men as lacking any “great sense of plight… Between themselves and the organization they believe they see an ultimate harmony” (4). The same can be said of Michael Scott. Michael loves working for Dunder Mifflin and identifies himself as a Dunder Mifflin employee. His actions often reinforce his love for the company. His love for Dunder Mifflin distinguishes him from his co-workers, none of whom enjoy their work.
For example, when news breaks that Dunder Mifflin intends on closing the Scranton Branch most of the employees are ecstatic. They see it as an opportunity to break free from the current monotony that defines their professional lives. Michael, on the other hand, cries and proceeds to drive to the CEO’s house to beg him to reconsider the decision. Accompanied by Dwight, Michael sits outside the CEO’s house and reminisces about his career as a manager. Dwight asks him what his favorite memory of working at Dunder Mifflin is, and Michael, in an obviously un-guarded moment, responds, “All of them” before sharing a laugh with Dwight over past memories. Without Dunder Mifflin, Michael would lose his identity (the branch ends up staying open).

Like the organization man, Michael does not believe in job hopping and does not ever want to work for another company. He sees himself as a life-long employee of his current organization and fights any attempt at change. He values his employees and sees them as part of the organization. Michael does not believe in firing employees even when it makes economic sense for the company. In season two Michael is ordered to fire an employee and struggles with the implications of what he
must do. At the moment he lowers the axe, Steve Carell wears a look of genuine devastation.

![Michael from “Halloween”](image)

The employee he fires is not featured in any of the previous episodes, and the audience has no emotional connection with this character. The camera instead directs the viewer to watch Michael as the scene unfolds, and we understand the pain that firing an employee causes him.

A Different Depiction

The loyalty Michael has for his employees and his organization is different from bosses in previous office films and movies. The idea that a boss could genuinely love a company and its employees is not a common theme among Hunter’s “Office Movies”, and Michael’s character bucks the trend of portraying bosses in a cynical light.

In *Office Space* boss Bill Lumbergh (played by Gary Cole) is devoid of loyalty to the organization and compassion for his employees. He’s more than willing to show off the wealth his executive position affords him and has no problem firing employees as part of Initech’s attempts to streamline efficiency. The only time he shows the film’s main character any sort of compassion is when his own job depends
on it. To main character Peter Gibbons and his co-workers, Bill Lumbergh is the enemy; he represents everything that is wrong with the organization. He controls their job security, makes them work on the weekend, and flaunts the wealth their efforts earn him. When Peter learns that one of his co-workers is going to be fired, he perfectly sums the plight he and his co-workers face in working for the organization,

For five years now you’ve worked your ass off at Initech hoping for a promotion or some kind of profit sharing or something. And you’re going to go in tomorrow and they’re going to throw you out on the street. And why? So that Bill Lumbergh’s stock will go up a quarter of a point (Judge 1999).

Not surprisingly, Gibbons’ frustration is aimed at his boss who symbolizes the organization and all the ways it holds down Peter and his co-workers.

Michael also stands in stark contrast to Slough branch manager David Brent (played by Ricky Gervais) on BBC’s The Office. Near the conclusion of season one, Brent learns that his branch is closing, and unlike Michael he makes no attempt to convince his corporate bosses that they should reconsider their decision. Instead he takes a promotion within Wernham Hogg that seals the closing of the Slough branch and the firing of some of his current employees. He does this without showing the slightest bit of remorse. Brent ends up failing a physical required for the promotion and gets fired at the end of season two. At the moment he loses his job, Brent sports a sad look and begs his corporate bosses not to fire him, thus rendering him “redundant.”
The moment mocks the use of corporate language and illustrates that Brent is only concerned with himself. He never sheds a tear for the other employees who also lose their jobs as a result of the downsizing. Brent’s ineffective managing and poor sales record may have contributed to the Wernham Hogg branch’s demise, but Brent shows no remorse for his actions or their consequences.

The common thread between these two bosses is that they never demonstrate any genuine care for their company or their employees and are instead portrayed as the enemy of common workers. Their chief concern is personal gain, which often comes at their employees’ expense. This sort of depiction is very cynical, and both Office Space and BBC’s The Office pit white-collar employees against their seemingly soulless bosses.

Michael’s character bucks this trend, and The Office makes it clear that Michael is not the enemy of his employees. He cares about his employees, will do anything to avoid firing them, and closes important sales that help keep the Scranton Branch afloat in uncertain times. Michael may annoy his employees through his attempts at humor, but at the end of the day he is a good boss. The season two episode
entitled, “The Client” illustrates this by contrasting Michael with his corporate boss and demonstrating how his prowess as a salesman helps stave off downsizing.

“The Client”: The creative salesman.

During this episode Michael Scott and his corporate boss Jan Levinson meet with Christian (played by Tim Meadows), a client who is considering leaving Dunder Mifflin for a national chain. Christian is one of the Scranton Branch’s biggest clients and keeping his business may help them stave off downsizing. From the beginning of the episode, Michael and Jan are portrayed as opposites. Jan takes a very formal approach to business, while Michael is more creative. When Jan calls Michael to confirm that the meeting will be held at a local hotel, Michael informs her he has changed the location to a local Chili’s restaurant because he believes that Chili’s is “where business gets done.” Jan disapproves, but this unorthodox location ends up being very important.

While Michael is a hyper-friendly boss, Jan comes across as an uptight, corporate executive. She rarely smiles and never makes any friendly gestures to other Dunder Mifflin employees. Her approach to business is professional, and she exudes the formalities that Michael eschews. When the meeting starts, Jan attempts to get right to business immediately asking Christian what his bottom line is. Sensing disaster, Michael intervenes by ordering an awesome blossom appetizer for the table. He tells a joke, sending Christian into a fit of laughter, and the meeting ceases to be tense.

Despite the friendly atmosphere Christian expresses no interest in signing with Dunder Mifflin because he is expected to reduce his company’s budget. His position
flusters Jan, but Michael continues to schmooze. He turns the conversation away from business and slowly phases Jan out of the conversation all together. Looking for ways to connect with Christian, Michael has everyone at the table reveal something about their personal life. The meeting begins to resemble a gathering of friends, but Michael always maintains control of the conversation.

When the moment is right, Michael tells Christian he has lived his entire life in Scranton. He tells Christian that national chains do not care about communities but only think about profit:

Here’s the thing about those discount suppliers they don’t care. They come in, they undercut everything, and they run us out of business, and then once we’re all gone they jack up all the prices.

After a night of bad jokes and yellow marguerites, Michael makes a plea to Christian: stay with us and we will serve you loyally, switch to a chain and the level of customer service will decrease. Christian hesitates for a moment as he looks at the man he has shared a night of cheap drinks and bad laughs with before agreeing to stay with Dunder Mifflin.

When Christian agrees to stay, Jan looks at Michael with astonishment. She cannot believe that this man, who conducts business in an unorthodox manner, is able to close a sale with such a crucial client who seemed intent on taking his business elsewhere. This episode is a huge affirmation of Michael’s skills as a salesman, and he closes the sale through creativity. Instead of simply presenting numbers, Michael befriends the client before explaining Dunder Mifflin’s position. Had Jan met with Christian alone, the company surely would have lost his business.

This is not, an isolated incident, and the show consistently foregrounds
Michael's prowess as a salesman. This prowess comes from the creativity that other employees lack.

“The Convention”: The importance of loyalty

“The Convention” once again foregrounds Michael’s sales prowess and illustrates the value he places on loyalty, a key characteristic of the organization man. During this episode, which takes place at the beginning of season three, Michael and Dwight travel to a convention for mid-level paper suppliers. Jim, who recently transferred to the Stamford branch of Dunder Mifflin, is attending with his new boss, Josh Porter (played by Charles Esten). When the four meet in the lobby of the host hotel, Michael points at Jim and in a humorous manner says, “Traitor.”

He then hugs Jim before the camera cuts away to an interview in which Michael says the following:

I was shocked when he told me he was transferring to Stamford. It’s like with fireman. You don’t leave your brothers behind. Even if you find out that there is a better fire in Connecticut.

When the camera returns to the scene, Jim looks at Michael with a big smile and says “It’s really good to see you man.”
Michael responds, “Yeah. Wow. I didn’t expect that. It’s good to see you to.”

Michael is surprised by Jim’s enthusiasm because he has assumed that Jim transferred to Stamford so he could work for a better boss. Michael cannot fathom that an employee might transfer simply to receive a promotion, which Jim did, because this would suggest Jim was not loyal. Loyalty to the organization and your boss is paramount, and Michael was hurt when Jim left. Jim’s pleasure at seeing him affirms that he still likes Michael and this takes Michael by surprise.

After Michael and Jim exchange greetings, the Dunder Mifflin contingency meets up with Jan in the hotel lobby and proceeds to check into their respective hotel rooms. Afterwards Jan, Josh, and Jim meet with representatives from other companies while Michael buys a plethora of booze and begins promoting a party he plans on
throwing later that evening. He collects convention SWAG and brags that he decorated his condo with SWAG from the previous year’s convention. At lunch Jan scolds him for his lack of professionalism, and this upsets Michael.

In the midst of his perceived tomfoolery, Michael befriends a Hammermill representative, who is hosting a paper airplane-making contest as a promotional tool. After participating in the contest, the camera cuts to Michael’s room where he and the Hammermill representative share a drink and talk business.

The camera cuts away to an exterior shot of the hotel and then cuts to a shot of Michael joining Dwight, Jim, Josh, and Jan in the hotel lobby. Looking a bit miffed, Michael informs Jan that Dunder Mifflin will now be able to sell Hammermill products, a company that previously was exclusive with Staples. It is the biggest sale of the weekend, and Jan apologizes to Michael by saying she underestimated him. Michael responds, “Yeah well maybe next time you will estimate me.”

That night, Jim visits Michael’s room and finds Michael sitting in the dark with a strobe light flashing and techno music blasting over some speakers. No one has come to his party. Jim turns the music off and the two converse. Michael sullenly claims that he understands why Jim transferred. Jim responds, in one of his most earnest tones, “I didn’t transfer because of you. You’re a good boss. You’re a great boss.” Comforted by this revelation the two share a drink and the episode ends on a happy note.

This episode is important for two reasons. Michael’s personal and creative approach to business allows him to close the weekend’s biggest sale, while fellow regional manager Josh struggles. Jim affirms Michael’s managerial skills, which
lends credibility to Michael as a boss. Jim, for lack of a better term, is the show’s coolest character and the one the audience identifies with the most. Along with Pam, he facilitates activities such as an “Office Olympics” and a live enactment of a script written by Michael. He has a charisma that other employees latch onto, and despite the drudgery of his job Jim always finds humorous ways to help him get through the day. During awkward moments, Jim will often express the awkwardness he and his employees experience as a result of Michael’s action through deadpan glances into the camera.

These glances create a connection with the audience.

Jim’s affirmation of Michael’s managerial skills is important because coming from his mouth, the statement has more credibility. At that juncture in the show, Jim is also the only employee to have worked under two bosses and he still affirms Michael as a boss. Josh, like Jan, carries himself with a more professional demeanor. Yet Jim appreciates Michael.

While Josh only appears briefly in the show, he is an important figure because his branch and Michael’s branch are basically competing to see which one can stave
off downsizing. They are vastly different characters and have very different approaches to business, and in the season three episode “Branch Closing” the show affirms Michael’s approach.

**Branch Closing: Corporate Blunder**

In the season three episode “Branch Closing,” Dunder Mifflin’s corporate headquarters decides that it no longer makes economic sense to keep both the Stamford branch and Scranton branch open. They decide to close the Scranton Branch because they want to promote Stamford manager Josh Porter and restructure the company so he can run a new branch called Dunder Mifflin Northeast. The corporate executives believe Josh will play an important role in the company’s future and view Michael Scott as dispensable.

Jan travels to Stamford to finalize the deal with Josh in person although she has already informed him of the news over the telephone. When she arrives, she informs Jim that the company wants to promote him to Josh’s current position. Jim, Jan, and Josh enter Josh’s office to work out the details, and Josh proceeds to inform Jan that he will not be accepting the job because he has accepted a senior management position at Staples. Shocked that Josh used his impending promotion to leverage a job with a competing company, Jan leaves the room in anger. The camera cuts to an interview with Jim who states in a disapproving tone, “Say what you will about Michael Scott, but he would never do that.”
In this same episode, Michael drives to the CEO’s house to beg him not to close the Scranton branch. By juxtaposing Josh’s lack of loyalty and the consequences it has for a company that has planned to re-structure its entire business to retain him, with Michael’s love of the organization, this episode serves as an interesting critique of Dunder Mifflin’s judgment and subtly suggests that modern companies might be better off by placing their trust in organization men than self-serving non-organization men. Josh resembles a What-Makes-Sammy-Run-Type. He is an employee who has no loyalty to the organization but looks out for his own good when making business decisions. In a modern business world where corporations cherish flexibility and “goal-centered” individualist employees (Postrel par 11), Josh seems like an ideal candidate for upper management. He’s professional, runs a competent branch, and is driven to achieve professional success. Yet Dunder Mifflin suffers when it attempts to reward Josh. He backs out of the deal, and the company must scramble. The Stamford branch ends up being absolved by the Scranton Branch and Jim returns to work there.

By contrasting Michael’s loyalty to Dunder Mifflin with Josh’s loyalty to himself, *The Office* is arguing that companies should place more value in an old-
fashioned sense of loyalty. In our creative economy individuals change jobs with more frequency and loyalty is no longer valued. Had Dunder Mifflin factored this notion into their decision-making and promoted someone who was much more loyal to the organization, they would not have had to scramble at the last moment to change their plans. Although Michael does not necessarily look the part of a manager or display the ruthless entrepreneurial spirit that some consider a quintessential part of American business, he would never betray the organization. It will not be first time Michael is passed over for promotion, and I will address his potential as a manager in a later chapter.

**Michael Scott v. David Brent**

BBC’s *Office* never portrays Brent as a master salesman, and this is one of the chief differences between his character and Michael Scott. Brent never closes any sales, and while he claims he has had success in the past his promotion to branch manager is never adequately explained. As a result, characters in BBC’s *Office* have more reasons to be miffed at their professional situation because Brent’s inability to sell paper increases the chance that their branch will close and their jobs will be lost.

In season two, BBC’s *Office* compares Brent with a fellow branch manager Neil Goodwin (played by Patrick Baladi), and Brent does not benefit from this comparison. At the beginning of this season the Slough branch merges with Goodwin’s branch, and Brent becomes second in command. Goodwin is portrayed as a funny, competent, and likeable. He is all the things Brent wants to be, and this further exasperates Brent, who is never as well liked as Goodwin. Goodwin is the BBC equivalent of Josh Porter, the Stamford Branch manager whose managerial style
is juxtaposed with Michael’s. When the American *Office* contrasts Michael with Josh, Michael ends up looking good because he displays loyalty to his company and his employees while Josh hinders Dunder Mifflin’s plans to restructure by leveraging his promotion into a better job with a competing company. The fact that Michael benefits from a comparison with Josh while Brent suffers from a similar comparison with Goodwin illustrates that the American *Office* makes a concerted effort to portray Michael in a more positive light.

In terms of loyalty to the organization, Brent never expresses a sense of loyalty to Wernham-Hogg. He likes his job because it gives him a forum to perform impromptu stand-up comedy routines and espouse his beliefs on life, but unlike Michael, Brent does not achieve harmony and personal satisfaction from working for the organization. He certainly does not show the same sort of loyalty to his employees that Michael does. At the end of season one, Brent takes a promotion within the company that guarantees his branch will merge with another branch and many of his employees will lose their jobs. And while he tearfully begs his boss not to fire him at the end of season two, his tears spring from humiliation rather than a real sense of loss.

**Conclusion**

Michael is both an organization man and a creative salesman. His creativity allows him to overcome his lack of business acumen and his weak work ethic to sell paper better than any other employee at his branch. His loyalty to the organization makes him seem a bit antiquated, but when juxtaposed with Josh Porter, an inferior salesman with no sense of loyalty, Michael looks like an employee undervalued by
Dunder Mifflin.

The next chapter will illustrate that the show goes out of its way to compare Michael with Ryan Howard, a non-organization man and terrible salesman.
Chapter 3: Ryan Howard: The Non-Organization Man

“If I had to I could clean out my desk in five seconds and nobody would know I had ever been here. And I’d forget to.” – Ryan Howard (Daniels and Gervais 2005).

If Michael is the creative organization man, Ryan Howard is the uncreative non-organization man. Played by B.J. Novak, who is also one of the show’s writers, Ryan’s character is presented in stark contrast to Michael in almost every way. Michael adheres to the social ethic, values loyalty to the organization, and finds redemption in his career at Dunder Mifflin. He uses creativity to sell paper and is very good at doing so. Ryan believes in the protestant work ethic, is disloyal to his boss, and sees Dunder Mifflin as a stepping-stone in a business career that will conclude somewhere else. Ryan displays no creativity and is a terrible salesman. Furthermore, Michael is a friendly, genuine individual and attempts to foster personal relationships with his co-workers. Ryan maintains distance between himself and his co-workers and has a penchant for mocking the company and its employees through sarcasm. The above quote reflects Ryan’s lack of loyalty to his employer and the sarcasm he so often expresses himself through; the picture is a good example of the subtle, yet cocky smirk he often wears on his face.

Ryan’s mentality towards the organization is reminiscent of the “What-makes-Sammy-Run type” described in The Organization Man. Unlike organization men, this type of employee eschewed loyalty to a company and placed personal gain ahead of the benefit of the organization. Ryan comes to Dunder Mifflin from a temp agency and remains a temporary employee through the first two seasons. After Jim transfers to Stamford at the end of season two, Ryan takes his job as a junior sales representative.
Instead of rejoicing in his promotion, Ryan proclaims the following:

“I’m not a temp anymore. I got Jim’s old job, which means at my ten-year high school reunion it will not say Ryan Howard is a temp. It will say Ryan Howard is a junior sales associate at a mid-range paper supply firm. That’ll show ‘em.

If a better job offer came his way, Ryan would take it and probably smirk at his fellow employees while he was cleaning out his desk. Sarcasm directed at the organization is Ryan’s chief means of expressing his feelings towards his current position. And while Ryan seems like someone who could be successful at business – he’s clean cut, maintains a professional demeanor, and works hard to improve himself – the show foregrounds Ryan’s professional shortcomings and undercuts his character at key moments.

Michael is the creative employee who is a great salesman; Ryan is the rigid, uncreative employee who is a terrible salesman. Ryan works hard at his job, performing every task Michael asks of him, but still fails. As a junior sales representative, his job is to establish accounts with customers and sell them paper, yet he fails to make a single sale while working at this position. The show often juxtaposes Michael’s success with Ryan’s failures as if to emphasize their differences. Three episodes in particular highlight The Office’s attitude towards Ryan, and its penchant for foregrounding his shortcomings.

“The Fire”: Revelation and Embarrassment

The fourth episode of season two starts with Michael conducting an evaluation of Ryan’s performance. The scene starts with the following dialogue:

Michael: 5 years from now what do you want to do? Where do you want to be?
Ryan: Well I’m interested in business.
Michael: Oh good, ambitious. Excellent. Want to be a manager?
Ryan: Actually, what I want is to own my own company?
Michael: That is ridiculous.

This dialogue illustrates one of the ways in which Michael resembles the organization man and Ryan does not. Michael finds harmony in working for the organization and being a manager in an established company represents professional success. He scoffs at the notion of starting a business because it would mean leaving the organization to strike out on one’s own. For Ryan, who believes in the protestant ethic, this is his dream.

When this dialogue concludes the camera cuts to an interview with Michael. He tells the camera that Ryan is about to attend the Michael Scott School of Business. The camera returns to Michael’s office, where Michael tells Ryan that throughout the day he will instruct him on the ten rules of business. Michael’s ten rules of business vary from pure gibberish – Rule 2: Adapt, react, readapt, act – to irrelevant celebrity quotes – “In business, image is everything,” Andre Agassi.

After Ryan leaves Michael’s office, a fire breaks out in the office kitchen forcing the employees into the parking lot. Michael finds Ryan to continue his training. Dwight interrupts the two and informs Michael that Ryan needs a number for the safety count off. Michael tells Dwight that Ryan needs a permanent number to which Ryan responds, “No I don’t.” The camera then cuts to an interview with Ryan in which he states, “I don’t want be a guy here. Like Stanley is the crossword puzzle guy, and Angela has cats. I don’t want to have at thing here.” This interview coupled with Ryan’s previously expressed ambition to own his own company establishes his desire to not become a permanent employee of Dunder Mifflin. Ryan values job
flexibility and envisions leaving this organization at some point. While he works hard at his job, he has no desire to stay any longer than necessary. This is a temporary stop in his envisioned career.

Back in the parking lot, Michael, Dwight, and Ryan stroll over to Ryan’s car where Michael sees a textbook in the backseat. Michael calls him an egghead, and Ryan explains that he has recently been admitted to business school and attends at night. This is an important revelation because at this point in the show not much is known of Ryan. The fact that he attends business school at night not only illustrates his dedication to self-improvement but makes him unique among the Scranton employees: Ryan aspires to a career outside of Dunder Mifflin and is actively working towards achieving it.

At this point in the show, no other employee at Dunder Mifflin Scranton has been portrayed as having a career aspiration that does not involve Dunder Mifflin. While most of the characters approach their jobs with apathy, they do not envision leaving the company for another position or they at least do not have a plan in place that will allow them to leave. Michael sees himself as a career employee; Jim possesses talent and is indifferent about his job but never makes any indication that he has a plan to leave. The other characters want to stave off downsizing and keep their jobs.

Considering these facts, Ryan stands in stark contrast to his fellow employees. He is the only one who not only wants to escape the drudgery of his current job but also has a plan to do so and is actively pursuing it. As a temporary employee he is at the bottom of the ladder, but this does not intimidate him. He exemplifies the
protestant ethic, which urges individuals to strike out on their own and rely on their own means to succeed in the world. In The Organization Man Whyte prints a quote from banker Henry Clews from a speech given to Yale Students in 1908 that sums up the protestant ethic:

> You may start in business, or the professions, with your feet on the bottom rung of the ladder; it rests with you to acquire the strength to climb up to the top. You can do so if you have the will and the force to back you (16).

Ryan fits this description. He is a young man starting at the bottom and relying on his own intelligence to one day start his own a business instead of answer to a boss. Business school and diligence at Dunder Mifflin are his means of self-improvement, and he will rely on his own skills to climb the professional ladder. At this point in the episode, Ryan comes across as a likeable character. He is a hard-worker who does not brag about the fact that he is pursuing an MBA. He may not want to stay at Dunder Mifflin, but this is understandable considering his boss thinks his idea of owning a company is ridiculous.

Upon learning that Ryan attends business school, Michael becomes threatened. His temporary employee is working towards an advanced degree that he does not possess. Michael asks Ryan to quiz him. Ryan refuses at first, because he does not want to show off, but eventually agrees. Ryan asks a simple question to which Michael responds incorrectly. The exchange highlights Michael’s lack of business acumen. After Michael responds incorrectly, Dwight says that Michael never graduated from college. Michael becomes embarrassed, and Dwight attempts to make up for his gaffe by telling Ryan that Michael never needed to attend business school. Dwight begins physically harassing Ryan the way an older brother would harass a
younger brother. Michael becomes upset and tells Dwight that Ryan knows more about business than he ever will. Dwight sulks off leaving the manager without a degree and the temp pursuing an MBA alone.

In the very next scene, Michael opens up to Ryan in a very tender, unguarded way.

The two sit in the backseat of Ryan’s car, which obviously makes Ryan uncomfortable, and Michael talks about how he knows little about business. He tells Ryan that he started as a salesperson because he loved people but was promoted to manager at a young age.

Unlike the previous scene, Michael does not seem threatened by Ryan’s education credentials but is genuinely impressed with his employee. The episode started with Michael assuming he would teach Ryan about business, but their roles change as the episode progresses. The reversal is completed when Michael tells Ryan, “You are so smart; you should be teaching me.” Ryan refuses to respond to Michael on any sort of personal level but insists they leave the car and re-join the other employees.
Michael’s moment of awe over Ryan’s knowledge is short lived as the situation turns on Ryan. Michael and Ryan rejoin the other employees, who are standing in a circle. Dwight becomes intent on regaining Michael’s trust, and he runs into the building to find Michael’s cell phone. When he emerges from the building, he holds up a burnt pita and informs everyone that Ryan started the kitchen fire by leaving this pita in the toaster oven. Dwight begins mocking Ryan. Michael joins in and the two dance around while singing, “Ryan started the fire.” As employees file back into the office, Michael finds Ryan and restarts his training by telling him that a key rule of business is “don’t burn down the building.” The episode ends with a Michael interview in which he states with confidence, “Ryan is book smart, and I am street smart.”

It is not coincidental that during the episode in which we learn about Ryan’s professional aspirations and his business school credentials, his personal credibility is undermined by the fact that he starts a fire in the office kitchen. The Office consistently undermines Ryan as a character, as if attempting to knock the cocky smirk off his face. The episode begins with Michael feeling superior to Ryan and ends on the same note. “The Fire” is an important moment in the show because it is the first time Michael and Ryan’s views on business and their professional credentials are juxtaposed. Michael, like an organization man, thinks being a manager of an established company is a reasonable goal; Ryan, a non-organization man, wants to break free of the organization and start his own business. Ryan is pursuing an MBA; Michael never graduated from college. This is also the first episode in which Michael
tells Ryan that people are the reason he entered business, a point of view Ryan does not share.

“The Initiation”: The smug demeanor emphasized

“The Initiation” undermines Ryan’s sales abilities the same way “The Fire” undermines his personal competence. It is the fifth episode of season three and has a simple premise: Dwight, who was Dunder Mifflin’s top salesman from the previous year, will take Ryan on a sales call as a training exercise. The training session is required because Ryan has been at Dunder Mifflin for over a year and has not made a sale.

That revelation is shocking. It’s been twenty-four episodes since we learned Ryan was attending business school, yet in that time Ryan has been unable to close a single sale, a task Michael, Jim, and Dwight do with ease. The persistence of his failure begs the question: why is Ryan, a student of business, unable to perform in a somewhat simple job?

In the first scene, Dwight attempts to fool Ryan with simple riddles and brainteasers. Ryan answers with ease, which exasperates Dwight who seems eager to prove his superiority. The scene is short, funny, and establishes that Ryan is too clever for stupid tricks. In the next scene, the two leave the office and Dwight drives Ryan to “Schrute Beet Farm.” He begins hazing Ryan in a similar manner to the way fraternity members haze pledges. Ryan becomes exasperated with Dwight’s routine because he wants to go on a sale’s call and attempt to get better at his job.
The hazing on the farm functions as pure comedy except for one exchange between the two characters, which carries a significant amount of gravitas. Ryan loses his temper and tells Dwight he just wants to go on a sale’s call. Dwight responds:

“You know what your problem is? You know why you haven’t made any sales? ‘Cause you think you know everything. You have to trust that you there are other people who can teach you things.

This quote illustrates The Office’s ability to reveal truth about characters in moments of absolute absurdity. Dwight is the show’s most absurd character and taking Ryan to a beet farm in the middle of the day with the intention of hazing him is one of his more absurd actions. But in the midst of this comic absurdity, Dwight beautifully points out Ryan’s chief flaw, his cocky attitude, and attributes Ryan’s professional failures to this flaw. Ryan may attend business school, but he places little trust in his fellow employees and consistently acts as if he is smarter than they are.

When the hazing concludes, Dwight takes Ryan on an actual sales call. Stung from Dwight’s criticism, Ryan intently listens as Dwight gives him real advice about how to close a sale. He is anxious to learn because business is his profession of choice, and at the moment he is not succeeding at it. The two reach the business they will attempt to sell to, and Ryan recites Dwight’s advice as they walk towards the building. As they enter the building the camera cuts to another scene. When it returns, Dwight and Ryan are walking out of the building, heads hanging. Ryan could not close the sale. In a moment of frustration, Ryan grabs two eggs from Dwight’s car and throws them at the building. His anger at his repeated failure is evident.

The camera then cuts to Dwight and Ryan chugging two beers at a bar. Dwight is happy to have someone to hang out with and chants Ryan’s name as he
chugs a beer. When Ryan puts down his glass, the two exchange the following dialogue.

    Dwight: Just think that temp agency could have sent you anywhere.
    Ryan: I think about that all the time.

Ryan says this line sarcastically and then looks at the camera with the smug look that defines his character.

Even in a moment of failure, a moment that clearly demonstrates he is struggling in his profession of choice, Ryan wears a look of smugness. Nothing diminishes his belief in himself no matter how misplaced this belief may be. “The Initiation” foregrounds his inability to do his job and argues that Ryan’s Achilles’ heel is his cocky attitude. His belief that his co-workers at Dunder Mifflin have nothing to teach him hinders him. When Dwight calls Ryan out, I argue that the Dwight’s words echo the show’s beliefs about Ryan: unless he learns to stop being so smug and start trusting his co-workers, he will never succeed at business. An MBA cannot teach him how to be a salesman. To learn that trait, he will have to trust Dunder Mifflin; he will have to trust the organization.
In this episode, not coincidentally, Michael closes a huge sale while Ryan and Dwight are out of the office. He closes it with ease after a day of doing nothing. This juxtaposition of Michael’s ability to easily close a sale with Ryan’s failure creates an unavoidable comparison between a creative salesman and an uncreative salesman, and despite Ryan’s business school credentials Michael is more valuable to the organization.

“Business School”: Ryan’s humiliation

The final episode I will examine in respect to Ryan’s character is entitled “Business School.” It is the sixteenth episode of season three and provides another comparison between Michael and Ryan’s characters. In this episode, Ryan invites Michael to be a guest speaker in one of his classes but fails to tell Michael that he will precede Michael’s speech by giving a presentation on the reasons why Dunder Mifflin’s business operations are doomed to fail. Essentially, Ryan plans on selling out his own boss; he plans to speak about the shortcomings of Dunder Mifflin’s management and then let a surprised Michael defend himself in front of a class of strangers. This act demonstrates a lack of loyalty, but the episode gives Michael the last laugh and humiliates Ryan once again.

At the beginning of the class, Michael waits outside while Ryan explains to his classmates that Dunder Mifflin’s management is “unwilling or unable” to adapt its business model to compete with national chains. When Michael begins his presentation he is unaware that his own employee has just slammed the company that is dear to his heart, and he launches into a hilariously simplistic speech about business basics. After a few minutes, Ryan interrupts Michael and tells him that he should stop
speaking and simply feed questions from the audience. Michael acquiesces, and students begin to bombard him with complex business questions he does not grasp.

At one point a student says, “By your own employee’s calculation you’ll be obsolete in the next five to ten years.” Shocked that his own employee would speak poorly of his organization, Michael goes on the defensive. Other students pester Michael by echoing Ryan’s arguments that Dunder Mifflin has no means of competing with large chains. Michael loses his composure and ends his presentation with the following words:

Dunder Mifflin is the big picture! Can’t you understand that? No you can’t. You’re too young. Ryan has never made a sale. And he started a fire trying to make a cheesy pita. And everyone thinks he’s a tease. Well you know what? He doesn’t know anything, and neither do you. So suck on that!

In the car ride back to the office, Ryan does not apologize but tells Michael “it wasn’t personal.” Michael, who is clearly hurt by what transpired, responds by saying “business is always personal, it’s the most personal thing in the world. When we get back to the office pack your things.”

When they arrive at the office it is the end of the day and they are the only two people there. Ryan apologizes for speaking poorly of Dunder Mifflin and asks Michael not to fire him. Michael simply shakes his head and tells him that a good manager hires people and inspires people, he does not fire them. He tells Ryan to move his desk to a less desirable location, a location where fellow employee Kelly will no doubt pester him. Ryan will be punished for his disloyalty, but he would not be fired.
The episode ends with Michael going to see Pam’s amateur art show. Pam is an aspiring artist without much talent; her art consists of simple drawings of common office objects such as staplers. Michael finds the value in her work and states that the drawings are so precise they could be mistaken as tracings. He says this because he believes it is true, and he believes in his employee. Pam, who is struggling with self-confidence, is moved by this complement. Out of loyalty to Pam and love of Dunder Mifflin, Michael a drawing of the Dunder Mifflin office building, frames the picture, and hangs it in the office.

In this episode, Ryan betrays his boss and criticizes Dunder Mifflin’s shortcomings. Is Ryan’s analysis of the company wrong? Not necessarily. Dunder Mifflin may collapse while trying to compete against national chains. But the way Ryan sets Michael up is clearly reprehensible. Michael handles the situation and turns the tables on Ryan by relaying to the fact that Ryan still has not made a sale and concludes the day by punishing Ryan. Michael proves that he doesn’t need business degrees to prove his self-worth or be an effective manager, because he is already a regional manager of a functioning business.

The episode illustrates Ryan and Michael’s different mentalities when approaching business. Ryan believes in education. He is clinical in his analysis and avoids emotional involvement with the organization that employs him. Michael is not academic. He learned his skills as an employee of Dunder Mifflin and wears his loyalty to the organization that taught him on his sleeve. To him the organization is paramount and criticizing it, even if that criticism is valid, is not tolerated. It also illustrates how Michael is loyal to his fellow employees – he goes to Pam’s art show.
– while Ryan is not. Like a true organization man, Michael is “employee-centered” and “a damn good fellow to boot.” He goes out of his way to support a co-worker, while Ryan sets up his boss for no good reason. By ending the episode with Michael showing loyalty to an employee, the show portrays Michael in a compassionate light. The episode puts Ryan in his place by embarrassing him in front of his classmates. Once again, the organization man trumps the non-organization man, loyalty and compassion trump knowledge, and Ryan is portrayed as a character that you feel sorry for.

**Ryan v. The Temp**

In BBC’s *Office* the temp is named Ricky (played by Oliver Chris), but he may as well be referred to as “the temp” since his character only stays on the show for six episodes. Chris is introduced in the series premiere, and at the end of season one it is announced that he is leaving. In between those two moments, Ricky experiences a somewhat undistinguished role at Wernham-Hogg. His biggest moment occurs in the third episode when he and Tim defeat David and his best friend Chris Finch in a game of trivia. Finch is angered over the victory and challenges Ricky on his last correct answer. Ricky calls him and Brent, “sad little men.”

While Ricky differs from Brent – he does not spend his days trying to make people laugh with an inappropriate sense of humor – he is not a major character and the show makes no attempt to contrast him with Brent. The development of Ryan as a main character around whom certain episodes revolve is one of the biggest differences between the two shows. I argue that Ryan’s character is developed as an antithesis to Michael Scott, and this allows the show to compare and contrast two
employees who approach business in opposite ways. Ryan is a very significant character in the American version while Ricky is fairly insignificant in BBC’s *Office*.

**Conclusion**

In his book *Starbucked*, a study of one of the most successful American companies of the past two decades, Taylor Clark claims America is place, “where a modicum of ruthlessness in pursuit of success is considered a healthy part of the entrepreneurial spirit” (174). Ryan Howard exudes this type of entrepreneurialism. He is willing to betray his boss, isolate his co-workers, and work hard to achieve success. Yet *The Office* constantly undermines his professional and personal credibility. Ryan is a non-organization man whose lack of creativity and cocky attitude hinders his job performance.

In *Rise of the Creative Class* Florida argues that Universities are hubs of creativity. *The Office* paints a different picture through Ryan. Ryan is the most educated employee at Dunder Mifflin, and he is the least creative. His lack of loyalty and poor salesmanship makes Ryan seem like an expendable asset at Dunder Mifflin.
Chapter 4: Jim Halpert

“My job is to speak to clients on the phone about quantities and type of copier paper. You know whether we can supply it to them, whether they can pay for it, and uh… I’m boring myself just talking about this” – Jim Halpert (Daniels and Gervais 2005).

This quote sums up the way Jim Halpert views his job for the first and second seasons (28 episodes) of The Office. Jim is presented as a smart, likeable, and capable individual. In one episode, Michael inadvertently sums up Jim’s talent in an ironic manner:

Jim Halpert. Pros, smart, cool, good-looking. Cons, not a hard worker. I can spend all day on a project and he will finish the same project in half an hour.

Jim is a good salesman, gets along well with his co-workers, and in certain episodes organizes silly activities that promote camaraderie among the employees and create a nice distraction from the drudgery of their work. In season two he organizes an “Office Olympics,” in which employees compete in made up games that involve everyday office tasks. A few episodes later he facilitates a group reading of a screenplay written by Michael. Both of these activities take place when Michael is out of the office and illustrate Jim’s natural abilities as a leader. While the branch employees grudgingly obey Michael, they happily follow Jim. Jim is presented as a capable, young man who has all the tools and personality traits to garner a successful career in a field of his choosing.

Yet for some unknown reason, Jim is stuck in a job that he dislikes and seems unable or unwilling to free himself from a position that does not require him to use his immense talent. Unlike Ryan, who has a specific career goal and is actively working to achieve it, Jim is tethered to a job he dislikes, and he never indicates that
he has any sort of a plan to move on or find a different job or career.

Part of the reason Jim remains at Dunder Mifflin is he has his feelings for Pam. The two constantly flirt, and they have the most personal connection of any two characters in the office. Pam, however, is engaged to a worker in the Dunder Mifflin warehouse, and despite her apparent dissatisfaction with that relationship seems intent on going through with her marriage. Jim seems somewhat undaunted by this fact and sticks around with the hope of changing Pam’s mind. In the season two episode “Halloween,” his true feelings about her are revealed. While killing time at the office, the two find a job opening online for a position that seems far better than Jim’s current position. In an interview Pam muses, “Jim is really talented, and he should be the one who’s getting a better job offer.” She then suggests that he take the job citing that it is a step up from his current position and will present him with a challenge. Initially Jim misinterprets Pam’s suggestion as a rebuke of their friendship, but at the episode’s conclusion he admits his feelings, “If she left I would take that job in Maryland because it’s double the pay and soft-shell crab just happens to be my favorite food.”

Jim’s feelings for Pam are part of the reason he stays at Dunder Mifflin, but they do not completely encompass his plight. Despite being very talented and a capable leader – two qualities that should help garner him success in a career of his choice – Jim seems unable to choose a path that appeals to him. He has no dream and no career aspirations, and he expresses his feelings during the final episode of season two:

Pam these are people who have never given up on their dreams. I have great respect for that. And yes they’re all probably very bad. And that
will make me feel better about not having dreams.

His lack of a dream keeps him from breaking out of his cubicle. At the end of season two it becomes clear that Pam is not going to break off her engagement, so Jim applies for a promotion with the Stamford Branch of Dunder Mifflin. He receives it, but his new job is no more fulfilling than his previous one, and it is in no way his dream career. A lack of any sort of dream or vision for his professional life is a big reason that Jim is stuck selling paper.

Understanding Jim’s attitude toward work is crucial to *The Office* because he is the show’s coolest character and the one with which the audience most identifies with. After Michael, Jim receives the most screen time and most narrative attention. His unrequited romance with Pam is one of the show’s biggest storylines. Michael is creative and loves his job; Ryan is uncreative and wants to use his job as a stepping-stone to a better career. As a character, Jim lies between Michael and Ryan. Jim is a good salesman, but he does not love his job. For the first two seasons, Jim’s defining quality is apathy, but in the third season his attitude changes.

**Branch Closing: A change in attitude**

The third season begins with Jim working at the Stamford Branch under branch manager Josh Porter. Although Jim received a promotion upon transferring, it is never made clear what the promotion entails and essentially he performs the same tasks he did in Scranton. He begins dating co-worker Karen (played by Rashida Jones), and while he gets along with Josh, certain episodes hint that Jim misses Michael. A prime example of this occurs in the episode “The Convention” which I analyzed in chapter three. In that episode Jim tells Michael that he is a great boss, and
he only transferred to Stamford because Pam rejected him as a romantic partner.

I argue an important shift in Jim’s character occurs in the season three episode “Branch Closing”, which I also analyzed in chapter three. In this episode Jim is offered a promotion and watches Josh leverage his own promotion into a better job with a competing company. This upsets Jim, who tells the film crew that Michael Scott would never act that way. Jan then tells Jim that the Scranton Branch will be absorbing the Stanford branch, and she wants him to return and work as the number two at that branch. Jim hesitates for a moment before telling Jan that he’s not sure if he wants to return to Scranton due to personal issues. She tells him “We will do whatever we can to get you to stay.” Her affirmation of Jim’s talents indicates that the organization greatly values him. At the end of the episode Jim must decide whether to take the promotion with Dunder Mifflin, which would mean returning to the Scranton Branch and working under Michael once again, or finding a job with a different company which at the very least would provide him with new challenges and a new career direction.

It would be reasonable to assume that Jim would at least entertain the notion of finding a job at another company, but instead he decides to stay with Dunder Mifflin. Jim still has no dream job, no vision for his career, but when he watches Josh callously leave Dunder Mifflin for his own gain, I argue Jim begins to understand the nobility of being loyal to an organization. Jim looks down upon Josh, who made a career change in a callous, selfish manner instead of considering what was best for the organization or being upfront about the possibility that he would be switching jobs. The anger that Jim expresses over Josh’s actions are reminiscent of the way
Michael is angered anytime someone speaks poorly of Dunder Mifflin, and at this moment the two characters seem more alike than ever.

Jim decides to remain loyal to Dunder Mifflin and returns to Scranton. At this moment, when Jim chooses loyalty to the organization, he transforms into an employee who despite disliking his job will stay loyal to the organization.

**The New Jim**

Upon returning to Scranton, Jim displays a more mature attitude towards his job. He still recognizes its idiosyncrasies that frustrate an individual with his abilities, but instead of continuing to complain he begins to laugh them off. He bonds with Michael at the office Christmas party and the two begin to form a more tangible friendship.

[Michael and Jim from “A Benihana Christmas”]

Later in the season, he is invited along with Michael to attend a party at the house of the Dunder Mifflin CEO, and as the season continues it begins to seem like Jim is being groomed to one day replace Michael, or take an upper management position with the corporate branch. At the party Jim bonds with Dunder Mifflin CEO and ends
up having a good time. By the end of season three Jim seems ready to accept the fact that Dunder Mifflin is his career, and he applies for a position at the company’s corporate office. At the season’s conclusion Jim comes across as more mature and more appealing than ever.

**Jim v. Tim**

Like Jim, Tim (played by Martin Freeman) is the most likeable character in his office. He uses deadpan glances at the camera to bail out of the collective mortification that often stems from awkward moments created by his boss David Brent or annoying co-worker Gareth. He pulls pranks on Gareth, subtly flirts with the branch receptionist Dawn (played by Lucy Davis), and talks about leaving Wernham-Hogg to complete an undergraduate psychology degree. He is a likeable character with whom the audience empathizes.

What prevents Tim from leaving his job is a stark lack of self-confidence that cripples him in the same manner that Jim’s lack of a dream inhibits his progress. This is the main difference between the two characters: Jim is presented as confident and talented while Tim is presented as meek and unsure of himself. Jim is a college graduate who dates several women during the course of the show. Tim has yet to complete his psychology degree, and he constantly undermines himself with quotations such as “No, I don’t talk about my love life for a very good reason, and that is I don’t have one” and “My room has seen a lot of action, mainly dusting.” His sense of humor is more than self-deprecating; it’s self-criticizing and indicates Tim has severe doubts about himself. Jim is stuck in a professional rut because he has no dream, no career goal. Tim is stuck because he lacks the self-confidence to quit his
job, return to a university, and move out of his parents’ house. Jim is a character with enviable qualities; Tim is someone who the audience likes but pities.

As a result, Tim does not play as important a role in the BBC’s Office as Jim does in NBC’s Office. Jim is a character who develops from someone who complains about Dunder Mifflin to a loyal employee who exudes many of the same qualities as his boss Michael. Tim comes across as the one sane character in the insane and frustrating world that is Wernham-Hogg, but his character does not evolve enough to influence the show’s arguments about white-collar work. Jim’s character evolves through the course of the show and as a result he plays a bigger role.

**Conclusion**

For the first two seasons, Jim is presented as an apathetic slacker who succeeds despite putting little to no effort into his job. He is the show’s coolest character and the one the audience relates with the most. In season three, his character evolves from someone who complains about his job to a character who accepts the hard parts of his profession and appreciates his loyal boss. As the show moves forward, Jim starts to resemble Michael: he’s an employee who started off as a successful sales rep but grows into a possible candidate for a managerial position.
Conclusion

“For years the Victory Optical plant had been an exception to the organizational age rule: It was operated entirely by foreman and self-made managers like my father, who had worked their way up from the shop floor… Then in the late 1960s and 1970s the plant owners began to hire college-educated engineers and MBAs to oversee the factory operations. With considerable book knowledge but little experience in the actual workings of the factory – without the intelligence of the men who ran the machines – these new recruits would propose complicated ideas and systems that inevitably failed and, at worst, brought production to a grinding halt… Just when the leading edge of the corporate world had begun moving toward the creative factory concept – the concept that Victory had always been run by – Victory had moved in the opposite direction: back to the past, to the deadly organizational age model that delegated creativity to the men at the top and denied it to the rank and file.” – Richard Florida, The Rise of the Creative Class.

In the last episode of season three, Michael is asked to come to Dunder Mifflin’s corporate headquarters and interview for a job opening. Upon learning about the opening both Jim and Karen decide to apply. The three travel to New York for separate interviews with CEO David Wallace.

In his interview Michael comes across as awkward. He does not gel with Wallace, who is consistently puzzled by Michael’s bizarre answers to his questions. After the interviews Wallace informs him that he will not be receiving the job. As Michael exits, he points at Jim and Karen and says that either one of them would be great for the position. If he won’t receive the promotion, he wants one of his employees to receive it.

During his interview, Jim seems a bit uncertain, and it’s not clear if he really wants this job. When asked to produce his sales’ numbers, Jim looks into his folder and sees a note from Pam wishing him good luck. Wallace asks Jim what he liked most about Scranton to which Jim replies, “the friendships.” The camera then cuts to a shot of Jim walking out of the office. He returns to Scranton, asks Pam out to dinner, and seems content to resume his life there.

The episode ends with a shot of David Wallace talking on the phone. The conversation implies that he has hired someone and is confirming the details of the hire.
He says, “It’ll be nice to have another MBA around here.” The camera then cuts to a shot of Ryan Howard on the phone, accepting the promotion.

**Implications of the promotion**

I chose the above quote from *Rise of the Creative Class* because the situation it describes is similar to the situation that surrounds this promotion. Like the foreman at the Victory auto plant, Michael became a manager by working his way through his organization’s system. His success as a salesman leads to his promotion, and as a manager he continued to be a great salesman. When his branch absorbed the Stamford branch, he oversaw the merger without losing a single client. Throughout his career Michael has displayed creativity in his approach to sales and his management style. But Michael did not receive the promotion. The promotion went to Ryan, someone who never had success at Dunder Mifflin, but whose graduate degree is seen as validation. It will gain him entry into the elite fraternity that is upper management, although he struggled while working in the trenches.

As a viewer, however, I can understand why Michael did not receive the promotion. It’s hard to imagine Michael working in the Dunder Mifflin corporate office. His antics are often met with disapproval at the Scranton Branch and they most certainly would be met with disapproval in the formal, corporate headquarters. Michael has loyalty and a love of the organization, but he is not the man in the gray flannel suit. He doesn’t look the part, and therefore does not seem like the right fit. If Michael did receive the job, there’s a chance that he would develop an innovative solution to the company’s problems and help them better compete with national chains. But this solution would only come after many failures. Creativity involves trying new things, and no one gets it right on the
first try. My guess is that his fellow corporate employees would tire of his antics before he ever had the chance

Promoting Ryan was the safe move by Dunder Mifflin because while Ryan is a terrible salesman, he probably won’t try anything too radical as a manager. He looks like an executive and acts like an executive, and therefore receives the promotion. Dunder Mifflin, like Victory, would rather promote someone with an advanced business degree than an employee who has proved himself over the years. Through this promotion the show is arguing that modern companies only want to foster creativity under specific circumstances. They will promote individuals with advanced degrees – because this is considered the measuring stick of creativity – but they will not promote creative individuals such as Michael. At no point during Michael’s interview did it seem remotely feasible that he might be offered the job. It seemed like Wallace was interviewing him out of courtesy.

According to The Office, the modern organization may not require their employees to pledge loyalty for life but they do require a level of conformity. By promoting Ryan over Michael, the MBA over the successful employee, Dunder Mifflin is establishing its own code of conformity: in order to reach a certain level education is required, because being good at your job or displaying creativity is not enough.
Conclusion

“Because that is the way these things are done, in films.” – Michael Scott (Daniels and Gervais 2007).

It is hard to rectify the conflicting aspects of Michael’s character. He is a socially inept buffoon whose managerial skills frustrate his employees and cause inefficiency in his office; yet he is also a gifted salesman who somehow overcomes his social ineptness in order to close important deals on a regular basis. The show never explains how this is possible, although a plausible explanation may not exist. If Michael is indeed a member of Florida’s creative class, than what does this imply about “creativity”? While I would not suggest that *The Office* has an agenda, the show satirizes the idea that creativity is a valuable professional skill by infusing its most socially inept character with a creative demeanor. This characterization questions whether the creativity Michael displays as a manager is valuable or simply misleading. It seems like his success as a salesman has given him a false sense of confidence, which has concurrently led to his penchant for trying new ways of managing his office. True creativity involves more than just the confidence to try new ways of doing something, and I am not sure how valuable Michael’s creative approaches to management are.

A similar inconsistency occurs in Ryan’s character. He possesses an advanced business degree but was unable to sell a single ream of paper during his time at the Scranton branch, something his colleagues did routinely. This premise is somewhat unrealistic. By emphasizing the Ryan is a believably bad salesman, that show’s writers reveal that they desperately want to portray him as an individual who is only valued by the organization due to his willingness to conform and his education
credentials. Ryan has no other redeeming professional qualities, and therefore the organization has no other reasons to value him.

Considering these two characters, I argue that *The Office* critiques the organizational model of management by promoting Ryan, whose only redeeming professional qualities are his willingness to conform and his educational credentials. This sort of promotion indicates that Dunder Mifflin does not think critically about who to promote and is willing to promote on somewhat shallow grounds. *The Office* implies that promoting creative employees is not a credible alternative by demonstrating that Michael’s “creativity” merely boils down to his individual ways of approaching management and that his ideas rarely demonstrate any sort of tangible value. His creativity stems from a false sense of confidence gained by his prowess as a salesman, which does not make him a good manager.

Furthermore, neither Michael nor Ryan achieves any sort of personal happiness outside of work. Michael expresses a strong desire to get married and have children, but the women he dates do not take him serious as a long term romantic interest. Ryan dates a girl he dislikes and is later rejected by Pam after receiving his promotion. Neither the creative employee nor the conformist achieves happiness outside of the workplace because aspects of their work personalities carry over to their personal lives in a negative way. When interacting with women, Michael tries to be creative and this leads to him looking like a buffoon. Ryan’s obsession with his image makes him come across as shallow. At work he tries to uphold the image of a successful professional willing to conform to a company’s culture; in his personal life
he tries to conform to the “cool guy” image and women tend to view him as a shallow individual.

*The Office* argues several things. To be successful in the modern organization one must be personable; Michael and Jim are both personable and they are both successful. “Creativity” does not make someone a good manager. To be valued by the modern organization, one must conform to their standards, and like organizations of the past Dunder Mifflin values educational certification over practical experience or past job performance. Ryan possesses an MBA, which is a mark of validation, and is willing to conform therefore makes a good candidate for promotion. Conformity in the modern organization is no longer defined as pledging lifelong loyalty, but it involves seeking out the credentials that make one eligible for upward mobility.

While this may seem a bit depressing, it is important to remember Jim, a character who finds happiness in the sometimes-absurd world of work. Initially Jim was an apathetic slacker, but by the end of season three he had matured into a character that is happy with his life and content in his job. He does not need a promotion to define him as a person, and he is more than happy to return to Scranton and resume his life, even if that means making photocopies on a daily basis. Jim’s character separates *The Office* from *Office Space* and BBC’s *The Office*, neither of which contain a character who ends up finding happiness within the organization. *The Office* is not polemical or overly pessimistic, and Jim represents their slightly more optimistic take on the world of white-collar work.

Jim’s character does resemble Tom Rath from *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Like Rath, who turns down the chance for promotion at the film’s conclusion,
Jim chooses not to pursue a promotion with Dunder Mifflin because it would take him away from Pam, his romantic interest. Jim chooses to continue working at the Scranton Branch because he can tolerate the work and staying in Scranton gives him the chance to pursue Pam. His choice reflects a happy medium between work and professional life, something that neither Michael nor Ryan ever achieve. Rath achieves a similar balance by turning down a promotion at the end of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. He will continue his job, which provides for his family, but avoid a promotion that would mean a large time commitment to the organization. Through both of these characters who are separated by nearly five decades, viewers are taught that work does not have to be as depressing as the gray flannel suits that once filled American offices.
Epilogue

While writing this thesis, I sometimes doubted the notion of applying serious social theory to a television show that often contains very silly humor. I believe that the main purpose of *The Office* is to entertain its viewers, and it is very good at doing that. From the nuanced comedic writing to the stellar timing of the actors, *The Office* is first and foremost a very funny show more than anything else, and I have enjoyed many hours watching and re-watching its many priceless episodes.

But whenever I think that assigning deeper meaning to a network sitcom is preposterous, I think about an acquaintance of mine named Thomas. Thomas is a funny, personable, intelligent human being whom I’ve had the pleasure of knowing for several years. He will often crack up a room through his creative use of words or some painfully keen observation. His jokes are never mean-spirited, and his laid back demeanor makes him very approachable. People respond to Thomas, and whenever he speaks, people listen with the hope that his words will give them fits of laughter.

When I met Thomas he was completing a graduate degree in accounting, and I found it somewhat disheartening that such a charismatic individual could spend the next forty years of his life balancing a company's check book and filling out its tax forms. Accounting is not a very creative profession, and I thought Thomas had too much potential to live such an ordinary life. I never spoke to him about why he chose this career, but I don't imagine that he did so because crunching numbers gave him a natural high. I surmise that he chose this path to obtain a good and stable job. He came from an upper-middle class family and seemed ready to replicate the financial success of his parents. With his intelligence and personality, I have no doubt that he
will rise fast and be very successful.

At the time we met, Thomas, like most of my friends, watched *The Office*, and whenever the show came up in conversation he praised it, always referring to Jim as a "solid character." During these conversations, I couldn't help but wonder if Thomas saw something of himself in Jim. I wondered if he realized that like Jim, he was entering a profession that was not going to utilize his many talents or fulfill him on a personal level. Accounting is not a dream career, and it seemed like Thomas was compromising. Being an accountant was a sure way to for Thomas to attain a certain lifestyle, and his choice represented a sort of conformity. He was not conforming to one organization for the rest of his life, but he was conforming to a lifestyle by knowingly choosing a career that would never require his full potential.

Is Thomas an organization man? Perhaps. He doesn’t fit the Whyte’s model, but he’s not a member of the creative class either. He sacrificed the chance at pursuing a creative career by taking a path that was more likely to garner him the lifestyle he wanted. This sacrifice is a way of conforming, and I think Thomas recognizes that like Jim he as choosing to accept a dull career. The last time I saw Thomas, we were at a bar with mutual friends enjoying a Thursday afternoon happy hour. We shared rounds of pitchers and many laughs. He was working at the time, but the transition to professional life had not dampened his spirits one bit.

What I love about *The Office* is that despite its dreary setting, the show never injects drama into its characters’ arcs but instead treats them in a very real way. At Dunder Mifflin Scranton there are no dying salesman or disheartened corporate climbers. No one quits their job and walks off into the sunset sporting a smile but
secretly wondering what the hell they're going to do with themselves. Dreams go unfulfilled and potential is wasted but life moves on. The characters deal with their problems without disrupting their lives, and they always find pleasure in everyday simplicities.

This mirrors my experience of the professional world. Every person I know has to decide how much to conform and how much to strike on his or her own. Not everyone fulfills all their dreams or has dreams to fulfill. Everyone does have a job and must learn how to deal with its pros and cons in a mature way. In the grand scheme of things, working for a bureaucratic organization is a pretty sweet deal, even if the job can be quite dull. It affords a nice lifestyle and the chance to find happiness in the company of others. Whenever I doubt this, I think about Jim sharing a laugh with a co-worker, or I think about Thomas enjoying happy hour after a long day at work.
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