Creating a Probation Automated Recording System: Issues and Considerations*

BY G. FREDERICK ALLEN, PH.D.

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work, Central Michigan University

MAKING THE best use of technology is not just desirable but necessary if probation is to remain efficient and effective and meet public expectations now and in the future. Some aspects of probation work can be made simpler with help from automation—for instance, the tedious task of completing forms and documenting supervision activities that absorb a significant amount of personnel time. Also, automation can be an important tool in this age when probation officers must do more with less, when they must process more complex cases in a shorter period of time. Nonetheless, probation has been slow to use automation to its full potential.

This article discusses some of the issues and considerations in using automation technology in probation and describes how the U.S. probation office in the Northern District of Illinois successfully implemented a new automated chronological recording system. The article highlights the process of and lessons to be learned from automation implementation and suggests a model for successful automation initiatives in human services organizations.

Resistance to Automation

Automation could be viewed as a boon to probation work. Why, then, have probation agencies failed to embrace full-scale use of automation? The answer may be in probation's traditional status as a human services agency. The work of probation, as with that of all human services organizations, tends to attract nontechnical people. Many of them have a deep sense of closeness to their clients and the confidence that intuitively they understand the clients and can empower them to find workable solutions to their problems. These nontechnical people understand in principle

that, in the process of helping their clients, they might find automation useful. But, in practice, they regard the helping process as more of an "art" than a "science."

The resistance and failure of probation and other human services agencies to embrace the full-scale use of automation is based on the assumption that what human services practitioners do—the decisions they make—cannot be guided by a computer because the process, or the art, of helping is too complex. A computer simply cannot process all the relevant but often nonverbal and nontangible elements that enter into it. This assumption might have been true in the 1970s, when technology was very limited, but it is not necessarily true today.

The nature of probation practice today lends itself to automation. The federal probation system, for example, has a new philosophy of supervision. In complying with the legal execution of the sentence, controlling offender risk in the community, and promoting the law-abiding behavior of all persons released by the court and the U.S. Parole Commission to officers' care, officers work to fulfill specific identified supervision goals.[1] Their activities are not so much a demonstration of the "art" of helping individuals as a series of activities planned to fulfill certain supervision objectives. Automation can be a useful tool in these endeavors, providing evidence that all identified goals are addressed and helping in measuring outcomes. On the surface, it seems that officers should welcome such technology, but many resist it.

Murphy and Pardeck[2] confirmed the reluctance of practitioners to use automation in the day-to-day delivery of services when they warned that the use of automation in social service agencies could potentially dehumanize the human services profession. Nevertheless, the use of computers in human services has been, and can be, useful. Ferriter[3] compared the contents of interviews, carried out under three conditions, with parents of psychiatric patients for the purpose of gaining information for psychiatric social histories. The three conditions were the traditional unstructured approach, a structured interview using multiple choice questions, and the same questionnaire delivered by a computer. Ferriter found that structured interviewing with the computer collected more information than unstructured interviewing. He also found indirect evidence that the subjects were more candid in giving information to a

computer than to a human interviewer. This was in line with previous research that showed that patients were more honest when giving information to computers than when they gave it to a psychiatrist.[4] Some subjects commented on the thoroughness of the interview by computer compared with interviews they had with social workers and doctors in the past.

People vs. Products

Human services agencies are social service organizations explicitly designed to process and change people.[5] These organizations are different, in two fundamental ways, from those that focus on products. First, the "output" of human services organizations is human beings while that of other organizations is not. Second, social service organizations have a general mandate to help people maintain and improve their well-being and functioning,[6] whereas product-type organizations have a general mandate to produce profits. The probation department is a good example of a human services organization. Probationers are the raw material, and the probation office has a duty to change this raw material to bring probationers' conduct to an acceptable level.

In our capitalistic system, the success of a product-based organization is revealed in that organization's financial balance sheet. Such a system has flourished because it is based on competition.[7] This competition results in the success of companies that are efficient and effective and the failure of those that are not. With human services organizations, the idea of competition has been emerging slowly. In the past, and in some instances today, effectiveness and efficiency have not been critical issues. More and more, funding sources for human services organizations are demanding such results.

Automation has been indispensable to the for-profit companies and has helped them compete. It has enhanced their efficiency, particularly in completing repetitive tasks. Human services organizations will have to adopt automation—automation tailored to meet their unique needs not as product organizations, but as human services organizations—if they too are to compete.

Practitioners used to believe that if the correctional system could be credited for one rehabilitated offender, the goal of rehabilitation still would be worth it. Of course, this philosophy was seriously challenged in the early 1970s when society, the funding source, demanded that all social services organizations be held accountable for effectiveness and efficiency or for producing sufficient results to justify their continued existence. This demand for agencies to be accountable forced social services organizations to adopt some form of automation. Expert systems were developed to aid practice. Management Information Systems (MIS) were developed to gather human services information

so that human services decisions could be made by applying facts from reliable databases.

Neugeboren[8] observed that the successful development and implementation of automation require an understanding of how the agency's goals and structures enhance or obstruct automation. These obstructions include anti-automation ideology, staff resistance, failure of management to support the automation initiative, and whether the information and benefits are directed to the line staff, to management, or to both. Successful automation initiatives only can be implemented by resolving the factors or conflicts in the agency that may potentially stymie successful implementation.

Another factor in human services agencies that works against successful implementation of automation is trying to use automation procedures geared for product-type organizations. Human services agencies need a different type of technology than product-type organizations. Taking this into consideration, the U.S. probation office in the Northern District of Illinois took a new approach in developing a chronological recording program. It called for officers (users of the program) to participate in developing data, with a technical consultant on the periphery guiding the technical aspect of the development.

Probation Automated Running Record System (PARS)

Record-keeping in corrections is extensive. In the case of the U.S. probation office for the Northern District of Illinois, considerable resources were being used for chronological recording. Chronological recording refers to the process of documenting supervision activities. The probation officer records supervision activities in the order of occurrence.[9] These records are usually referred to as chronos. A considerable number of hours was used to dictate and type these chronos. Yet, in some cases, chronological recordings were several weeks behind—partly because of the sheer volume of work and partly because presentence reports and other special reports to the court were given higher priority. Even when the chronological recordings were brought up to date, usually at the expense of other work pending, the question arose as to how these volumes of chronos could be used to improve practice. Most of the chronos recorded the officers' subjective observations, but sometimes these observations were not relevant to the case plan. For example, consider the following chrono entry:

9-21-97 OFFICE VISIT: Probationer arrived on time for his scheduled office appointment. He was cordial as usual, reporting that there has not been any new development in his life since the last contact. He mentioned that he was quite pleased with his younger daughter's adjustment in school in that her report card showed all "A's." He appeared somewhat concerned about his younger son, who received a suspension for fighting in school. The probationer stated that he had to take off from work on the 9th to attend a school conference with the teacher. We talked in general about the

challenge of being a parent in these troubled times. We also discussed how the probationer might deal with his son's adjustment problem at school.

The above entry reflects that the officer made a contact and that the officer is capable of showing genuine interest in the probationer. What it does not reflect is (1) the identified goal of supervising the probationer and (2) whether the probationer is satisfying the identified goal. On the other hand, the entry may serve other purposes. It may serve to establish and justify the officer's perception of his or her accountability. It also may serve to promote the officer's own goals, perhaps even ignoring the official goals of executing sentence, controlling risk, and promoting law-abiding behavior.

The probation office in the Northern District of Illinois was experiencing problems with the traditional chronological recording system:

- Entries were too long. Officers were dictating stream-of-consciousness material and myriad details of supervision activities, which used clerical resources beyond their capacity.

- Entries were generally not focused, and, often, any references to the supervision plan were more coincidental than planned.

- Entries tended to reflect the probation officer's personal interest. The entries—intentionally or unintentionally—obscured what was in fact occurring in the supervision process. At times, the entries shifted emphasis from the official goals of supervision to the offender's area of interest or concern.

Officers were writing about their observations, but were these observations relevant to executing the probation sentence, controlling risk in the community, or promoting law-abiding behavior? Officers with social work training may have inherited the long-standing practice in social work orientation to use "process recording." Process recording is the almost verbatim description of a counseling session. This technique is useful in social work training in that it allows the instructor to review the information recorded and provide a helpful critique of the counseling interaction. This form of writing is so strongly ingrained in social work education that social workers have been known to continue this writing style in their practice.

In the Northern District of Illinois, the probation office created a new chronological recording system (PARS) to replace process recording and to allow officers to use the computer to record chronos based on the case plans. The administration liked this new chronological recording system because it guaranteed that some relevant and current chronological recording would be in the file. It helped ensure that if an emergency should occur, the most recent information on the probationer would be available. On the other hand,

some officers did not like the new system because although it reduced preparation time for chronos, it required officers to address the goals and objectives of the case plans. Actually, at times, offenders presented immediate issues, which caused the probation officer to deviate from the goals and objectives of the supervision plan. The officer may have felt that responding to these immediate issues was appropriate in the role of service delivery. However, these responses were often inconsistent with the official goals of the supervision plan and with the administration. The point to note here is that although the goals of the administration and those of the officers seemed to be different, they were not; the deviation from the supervision plan simply had to be placed in the proper perspective. This way, officers could respond to deviations without replacing the goals of the supervision plan. Automation was viewed as a promising way to reduce the danger of replacing the goals of the supervision plan with these deviations.

The probation office had five supervision units. The new system was implemented in three stages,[10] and stage 1 of PARS was implemented in one of the five units. Like any other computer program, the system needed data. A running record sheet was developed to collect supervision issues and responses. This first stage was done manually and did not involve the officers' use of a computer. Officers created running records on the sheets. Creating these running record sheets was an ongoing process. Each response was given a number. With the data in and labeled with a number, the computer eventually could simply recall the data. Officers used the sheet to do their dictation and validate the issues or responses on the sheets. They used another sheet to record suggestions for unique situations. These suggestions were added to the sheet of issues and responses.

This initial step introduced the program to a small, manageable group. It allowed the automation specialist to work one-on-one and to respond to individual problems. It also provided an opportunity for users' input and participation in the product.

Stage 2 required the probation officer to submit a running record sheet, showing the offender name, the date of the activity, the contact code, the statement number(s), and relevant contact code data, if necessary. Secretaries then used the form with codes to generate chronos in clear, concise, and relevant language. This stage involved manual and automated processes. It took into consideration that not all officers had access to a computer. It reflected the promise that automation can be initiated even when a full complement of computers is not available—a reality that faces many human service agencies. This stage also provided a smooth transition from the manual process to the automatic. It helped officers see the link and understand the essence of automation, that there is no magic—

garbage in garbage out! Finally, this stage also allowed non-technical officers to move at a slower pace or to make the transition to a more automated level when they felt comfortable doing so.

Stage 3, the final stage, involved the full-scale use of a desk-top computer. The probation officer entered the codes directly into the computer in conjunction with the identified supervision issue. This final stage involved the perception of the program as a tool to make probation work more efficient and effective. Officers then were reminded that there are instances in which the automated process might not be appropriate. In such cases, a manual description of the supervision process is indispensable. The ultimate success of the program is the officer's judgment of when to use the automated program and when its use might not be appropriate.

How the Program Works

The program promotes the basic legal requirement of running records. It provides an accurate recording of the supervision process that is consistent with the duties of the probation officer: "A probation officer shall . . . keep a record of his work, and make such reports to the Director of the Administrative Office of the United States Courts as the Director may require."[11] The record contains the date, place, and nature of contacts made with the offender and others. Each entry is designed to be a concise statement reflecting the supervision issue addressed, action taken by the officer, and whether the offender's progress in resolving the issue is satisfactory or unsatisfactory. The running record should not be redundant. It should not contain information that exits elsewhere in the probationer's file. It is based on results, not pages of telephone calls and meaningless data. Looking at the running record, the reader should be able to grasp whether there is a problem in the case and, if so, what is being done.

The Use of Macros

The program uses a WordPerfect feature called macros. Simply put, a macro is a recorded keystroke that can be played back just as it was recorded, much like the redial feature on a telephone. In this case, clear and concise statements reflecting supervision activities were developed and recorded in macros. Instead of manually typing the activities, the officer invokes the macro to prepare the chrono statement. Statements are selected from a menu, as shown in table 1. The menu is based on relevant goals of supervision dealing with probation conditions, the offender's risk, and correctional treatment such as special financial, service and confinement, third-party risk, employment monitoring, finance monitoring, residence monitoring, monitoring criminal activities while under supervision, substance abuse monitoring, mental health condition monitoring, monitoring pending charges, correctional treatment,

arrests, court hearings, special reports, appointment schedule, case transfer, and closing summary.

TABLE 1. PARS MAIN MENU

(OFFICE)—DISTRICT OF (NAME)
PROBATION RUNNING RECORDS MENU

  1—Retrieve Running Record File
  2—Satisfactory Compliance
  3—Special Financial, Community Service, and Confinement
  4—Community Service
  5—Risk Control
  6—Travel
  7—Employment Monitoring
  8—Finance Monitoring
  9—Residence Monitoring
10—Monitoring Risk Activities While Under Supervision
11—Substance Abuse—DAP Monitoring
12—Mental Health Condition Monitoring
13—Correctional Treatment
14—Arrest
15—Court Hearing
16—Special Report
17—Monitoring Pending Charges

PgUp—Previous Page
I—Information Screen PgDn—Next Page   Q—Quit

Type Form Number of Your Choice and Press [Enter]   PAGE 1

In using the program, the officer is required to identify the presence of a supervision issue or problem from the case plan. If there are no issues or problems associated with the case, the program defaults to a generic statement reflecting that the officer conducted a contact and identified no issues or problems that required a specific correctional intervention. Officers are required to locate the applicable issues or problems in the main menu (see table 1). In the case where the client is satisfactorily complying with the conditions of probation, the officer chooses number 2, "Satisfactory Compliance," which then generates the statement: *This contact confirmed satisfactory compliance with all conditions and no changes or problems noted.* In cases in which the client is not satisfying a condition of probation—for example, failure to pay restitution—the officer chooses number 8, "Finance Monitoring." The program jumps to a submenu on financial issues, prompting the officer to locate and classify the issue or problem that applies to the case. Once the officer selects the issue or problem, the program takes the officer to a *proposed action* table (see table 2), again prompting the officer to select an appropriate correctional intervention to address the problem.

The PARS program, although a simple macro-driven program, if used properly, helps ensure that the probation officers' activities are goal-directed. The program can help officers resist the natural temptation to write descriptively on their personal interests, or on topics that

TABLE 2. PROPOSED ACTION

(OFFICE)—DISTRICT OF (NAME)
PROBATION RUNNING RECORDS MENU

1—PO will check bank records including checking account, if available.
2—PO will examine business records.
3—PO will examine tax returns.
4—PO will submit a Special Report to the court.
5—PO will send a warning letter regarding the offender's failure to comply with the special conditions of probation.
6—PO will submit a Special Report to the court regarding offender's failure to comply with the special conditions.
7—A violation conference will be scheduled to respond to offender's violation.

Q—Quit

Type Form Number of Your Choice and Press [Enter]　　PAGE 1

crafty probationers lead officers to, instead of addressing the court conditions, correctional treatment, or community risks that may be associated with the probationer.

The reader should note that PARS was based on Word-Perfect 5.1 and makes use of a macro procedure that has been improved. Nevertheless, considering the technology that exists today, more than adequate technical resources are available for even the most ambitious automation initiatives in human services agencies. What is difficult is to develop an automation culture in the service agency that views automation as a helpful tool to bring probation work up to the expectations of the 21st century. Probation staffs need only to brainstorm among themselves about areas in management decision making, case planning, and officer/offender accountability in which automation can improve their operation. In bringing about a successful automation program, a list of some "lessons," presented below, provides a model on which to build a fully functioning automation program.

Lessons to be Learned

1. Involve staff members in the planning so that they may become invested in the project.

2. Differentiate the program goals for the administration from the goals of line officers and staff. The administration, line officers, and staff must derive specific worthwhile benefits from the program to sustain their involvement. For example, the administration may be interested in the improved level of accountability that the program offers—there will always be something in the file that makes sense. The line officers may be drawn to the ease and convenience of operation while acknowledging that official goals instead of substitute supervision goals will be required. The clerical staff should see the benefits of moving away from tedious, repetitive typing to more productive work.

3. Assign a representative core group to study the problem—usually, the problem affects several levels, and all should be represented in the planing process. For example, automating chronos will affect the clerical employees. They will have concerns about being redundant. They may be assured that automation may mean different roles and duties—as in the case of voice-mail freeing up clerical workers from answering phones to participate in more productive assignments.

4. Define areas in which automation can be applied. In some cases, because the computer can handle multiple tasks, agencies are tempted to automate everything—leading to a program that is too complex and unworkable.

5. After everyone understands and accepts the goals, bring in the consultants. Developing automation programs in human service agencies is not a proprietary process for automation specialists. You need specialist technicians to develop the technical portion of the program. However, the line officers are the ones who initially must articulate what the problems and the desired outcomes are. When such preliminary work is completed, it then is appropriate to involve the technical consultants. Let them figure out how to resolve the articulated problems—do not let them define the problems. The technical consultant will be more useful if all or most of the issues and concerns have been identified. The task then is to find solutions. The consultants may know a lot about computers, but they may not know a lot about your particular agency. Computer consultants are usually bright people who have been working with computers—computers do not talk back, tend to be logical, will do exactly what you tell them to do, and have a lot of energy as long as they are plugged in—these are not characteristics all staff members share!

6. Select a pilot group to work with the technical consultant.

7. Implement the pilot. Select a unit where the seeds of automation will grow. Trying to automate an entire office may be difficult. If the program succeeds in the target unit, it will be easier to convince other units to join in.

8. Evaluate and learn from the pilot implementation. Procedures may have to be reworked, and assumptions made may not be valid. Evaluate the program and make modification as needed. Remember that implementing automation is a process; there is almost never a final fix.

Conclusion

Automation in probation is not easy. Tension exists between persons who see the computer as a threat to

their professional role and expertise and those who welcome and seek out its potential for help and support in their work.[12] Management must be fully committed to automation to overcome officers' resistance. In offices where social work staff form the core group, automation initiatives may become a process of working with the staff incrementally. Staff members will need to see the real benefits of automation. For many, it will be like learning a foreign language.

Valuable data on the supervision of offenders are sitting on shelves gathering dust—quite a waste of human effort. Automation promises to bring all this information to use. Automation enables agencies to find out how many offenders are unemployed, have chronic drug/alcohol problems, are considered high risks, have failed to satisfy court conditions, or have failed to report for supervision. Without some form of automation, most offices would be hard pressed to address these issues. Yet, these types of data are information that all offices should have at their disposal to guide and influence program development.

While the probation system, like the other helping professions, has relied on client satisfaction as its primary measure of effectiveness,[13] in an era of scare resources, ever more demand will be placed on outcomes based on official agency goals. Automation can help. However, offices that are initiating automation programs should be careful how they adopt the models that have been used for profit-based organizations. The technology, the staff, and the raw material in human service agencies require the use of a new model, a model that takes into consideration the realities of human services agency characteristics. Conspicuous in the model presented in this article is the introduction of the outside consultant or the technical personnel later than usual in the planning process. Human services practitioners have a significant role to play in identifying the problems and goals that the automation program is designed to address. They are the key players who are uniquely positioned to identify critical areas in which automation can solve the core problems that will face probation in the 21st century.

NOTES

[1]Probation and Pretrial Services Division, Administrative Office of the United States Courts, *Supervision of Federal Offenders* (Monograph 109). Washington, DC: Author, 1993.

[2]J. Murphy and J. Pardeck, "Computerization and the Dehumanization of Social Services," *Administration in Social Work, 16*(2), 1992, pp. 61–72. J. Murphy and J. Pardeck, "Technology in Clinical Practice and the Technological Ethic," *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 15*(1), 1988, pp. 119–128. J. Murphy and J. Pardeck, "Technologically Mediated Therapy: A Critique," *Social Casework: Journal of Contemporary Social Work, 67*(10), 1986, pp. 605–612.

[3]M. Ferriter, "Computer Aided Interviewing in Psychiatric Social Work," in *Technology in People Services,* Leiderman, Struminger, and Monnickendam *(*eds.). New York: Haworth, 1993. See also R. Lucas, P. Mullin, C. Lunar, and D. Mclnroy, "Psychiatrists and a Computer as Interrogators of Patients with Alcohol Related Illness: A Comparison," *The British Journal of Psychiatry, 131,* 1977, pp. 160–167.

[4]A. Carr, A. Ghosh, and R. Ancill, "Can a Computer Take a Psychiatric History?" *Psychological Medicine, 13,* 1983, pp. 151–158.

[5]Y. Hasenfeld and R. English (eds.), *Human Service Organizations.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974.

[6]Hasenfeld and English.

[7]M. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962, pp. 119–120.

[8]B. Neugeboren, "Organizational Influences on Management Information Systems in the Human Services," *Computers in Human Services, 12*(3/4), 1995, pp. 295–310.

[9]Probation Division, Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, *The Supervision Process* (Publication 106). Washington, DC: Author, 1983.

[10]The three stages were duplicated in modified forms in the other probation supervision units.

[11]Title 18, United States Code, Section 3603(5).

[12]D. Colombi, "Assessment and Provision of Services" (Introduction), *Computers in Human Services, 12* (3/4), 1995.

[13]L. Gerber, S. Brenner and D. Litwin, "A Survey of Patient and Family Satisfaction With Social Work Services," *Social Work in Health Care, 11, pp.* 13–23.