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“Mail carriers’ routes: Managerial standards, collective regulation and work activity strategies”[☆]

Didier Demazière^{a,b,*}, Delphine Mercier^{a,b}

^a Laboratoire Printemps, CNRS-Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, 47, bd Vauban, 78047 Guyancourt Cedex, France

^b Laboratoire d’Economie et de sociologie du travail (Lest), 35, av.Jules-Ferry, 13626 – Aix-en-Provence, France

Abstract

The work of mailmen is mainly defined by the delivery routes they are assigned. Since this special organization of work grants them broad autonomy, the processes for delimiting, defining, and conducting routes, must be analyzed by taking into account observations from three levels. The first one focuses on the French Post Office’s managerial standards, though, increasingly determined by objectives for making a profit, have little impact on mail deliverer’s activities. The second centers around this occupational group’s own regulation which stem from a hierarchy based on seniority and control over mail delivery and routes. The third level of observation takes into view the strategies for delivering mail that postmen adopt on their routes. These strategies reflect different relations to managerial objectives and to consumers; and they reveal contrasting conceptions of the job of delivering mail. Emphasis is laid on the fact that the situations for working at lower levels in the service sector cannot be separated from the factors defining and organizing these situations.

Keywords: Mail deliverers; Service sector job; Occupational group; The organization of work; Customers; Public service; French Post Office

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Corresponding author.

E-mail address: didier.demaziere@printemps.uvsq.fr (D. Demazière).

The postal service in France, specifically mail delivery, has been affected by major changes, changes that were accelerated by the dismantling of the public administration called *Poste et Télécommunications* and the 1991 creation of a public enterprise, *La Poste* (Barreau, 1995). The sector opened to competition under the effect of new European Union regulations restricting state service monopolies on mail delivery, regulations that have gradually substituted notions of “universal” and “special” service for that of “public service” (Toledano, 1998). *La Poste* soon launched several initiatives for adapting to the new environment and increasing profits in the mail delivery sector, creating specialized systems for handling business-to-business mail (*Dilipack*, for example) and buying private businesses, diversifying products and activity sectors (*Chronopost*, for example), and setting out to conquer a share of the market in delivery of non-addressed mail (advertising material).

The activity of ordinary mail delivery does not seem to have been much affected by these changes, however, despite management’s overt emphasis on the leitmotiv of “modernizing public services” and its promotion of “business logic” (Teissier, 1997). The organization of labor in the postal service, based on the idea of bringing together mail carriers and mail routes, has remained remarkably stable since the early twentieth century. The French national territory is divided into zones, each of which is allocated to a mail carrier responsible for sorting and delivering mail addressed to inhabitants of his or her zone. The mail carrier’s route, the notion of one mail carrier for each route, has long structured the postal service. But this description cannot account for mail delivery service in its entirety since that service involves so many heterogeneous activities. When this service is understood as getting a given quantity of mail into a given number of mailboxes, doing one’s route means going through a routine of easily monitored tasks; but the job also involves preparation to deliver, which consists of each mail carrier sorting the daily mail inflow for his or her zone by streets and numbers. From this perspective, repetitive tasks, the lifting and handling labor involved, the physical strain of working outside in all weathers makes mail carriers’ situation comparable to that of “the manual worker’s condition” (Beaud and Pialoux, 1999).

When apprehended in terms of the interactions that the mail carrier develops with residents in his or her zone, the mail route is also a service to users or customers. Delivering the mail implies language acts and localized encounters; these in turn characterize mail carriers’ work as a service relation, a “human contact” job, a “public-oriented profession” (Joseph and Jeannot, 1995). And the route is also a space for exercising activities at the margins of the institutional order: it involves practices that fall outside official job specifications, i.e., the annual sale of postal service calendars for the sole profit of the mail carriers themselves, though these practices are known to and accepted by the company. This underscores the fact that mail carriers’ work is rooted in a professional or job tradition where salaried employment cohabits with parallel production of goods and services in for-profit if not outright market activities similar to “perruque” practices (Weber, 1989).¹

These preliminary observations move us to look into the processes that frame and define mail carriers’ job activity: what do they do, how do they do it? what is it to be a mail carrier? To answer these questions, it is not enough to ethnographically observe mail carriers in action (Abdollahzadeh, 1999), even though mail route work is done at a distance from the organization. Mail carriers have a role in shaping their activity; in fact, they have quite remarkable

¹ The “perruque” [wig] refers to a worker using company material and equipment during work hours and on company premises to make objects that are not company products.

autonomy, a degree unequalled among civil servants near the bottom of the administrative pyramid. But it is also important to understand how mail routes are socially organized; to grasp the practical arrangements, norms, rules and procedures as they are manipulated, promoted, and monitored with varying degrees of success by the actors who help define mail carrier work. We set out to do this in an in-depth study conducted in two mail distribution centers in the outskirts of Paris.² We followed mail carriers on their routes, observed their collective activities (namely the morning sorting session), interviewed them for biographical information and explanations of observed activities, compared this material with videotapes produced during observation, interviewed managers and forepersons, observed work organization and task distribution, inventoried the instruments used for managing and monitoring mail carriers' activities and analyzed their use (Demazière et al., 2001).

This combination of methods showed that mail carriers' work is shaped by heterogeneous types of logic which may be described at three levels. The first pertains to the strategic directions of the company La Poste and their realization in the form of instruments for managing employees and their activities. In the new competitive context, performance and efficiency criteria become managing norms, including for managing mail delivery and evaluating mail carriers' work. The second level pertains to work collectives and the "mail carrier" professional group, which is structured by seniority rules. Relations between experienced and novice personnel are to be understood with reference to mechanisms for learning the occupational ropes and transmitting a professional history produced and maintained by collective regulation and specific rituals. The third pertains to individuals and the meanings they invest their work and the corresponding localized activities with. Each mail carrier operates and becomes inscribed in a particular space, meets residents with diverse behaviors, questions, and demands, and develops strategies for working on his or her territory that give a particular "shape" to the mail route.

1. Overseeing and managing mail carriers' performance: instruments with little effect

A mail carrier's workday is divided into two periods, characterized by different tasks, organizational rules, invested spaces, and worker-company relations. The first corresponds to different sorting stages, performed in mail distribution centers under supervision of team leaders who set priorities and if necessary remind personnel of the rules. The second period begins when the mail carrier leaves the distribution center to deliver the mail. Each person goes to his or her specific zone and does the work out of sight of the organization and hierarchical superiors. This does not mean the mail carrier is isolated; rather his or her interlocutors are no longer colleagues but customers.³ Delivery activity is nonetheless defined by norms and management tools aimed

² The study was funded by the "Mission Recherche" bureau of La Poste and by the "Travail" program of the Research Ministry. It was conducted in 2001 by a team from the Printemps research laboratory made up of Didier Demazière, Claude Dubar, Anne Guardiola, and Delphine Mercier. Research was facilitated by cooperation from the *département* director of La Poste and directors of the sorting centers, and by the many mail carriers and team leaders who agreed to be interviewed.

³ Customers, that is, from the perspective of delivery work: mail addressees, not senders (though senders of course pay for the delivery). The issue of who the real "customers" of the company are is hotly debated within La Poste, but that extremely interesting question is too peripheral to be discussed in detail here. As far as mail carriers are concerned, their customers are the residents on their mail route. It is in this sense that the term is used here, as this was the term used by most carriers and they almost never used other terms, such as user. Still, the meanings attributed to the word customer are highly variable, as will be shown.

at increasing productivity by regulating work hours, ensuring service reliability by defining and setting operating procedures, and increasing profitability through commercial incentives.

1.1. Working hours and productivity

Mail carriers' work depends directly on the characteristics of the individual mailroute. It's one thing to deliver mail to apartment buildings with banks of mailboxes numbering in the hundreds, quite another in neighborhoods with single-family houses or shopping streets, and mail carriers may get around on foot or by bicycle, moped, or car. These are incompressible qualitative differences; they reflect the heterogeneity of the territory in topographic, architectural, and social terms. In the two distribution centers studied, mail routes were quite disparate, though most were done on a bicycle.⁴ They were of different lengths (from 5 to more than 25 kms), served varying numbers of customers (from 300 to more than 1000) and were the distribution points along them were of varying densities.

The company tries to give mail carriers even workloads by estimating the time required to deliver the mail on each route. Once a year mail carriers measure mail flow for each working day of the week; the average per route gives the measure of mail traffic density. The observed volume of mail is then relativized by taking into account mail route characteristics; this allows for accurately assessing amount of time theoretically needed to cover each of them.⁵ Every one to five years, route-coverage time measured this way is compared with length of time assessed by a tester who has gone along with the mail carrier on his or her route. Empirical observation such as this may lead to modifying mail route perimeters to minimize discrepancies with prescribed average time.

These measurements are of course highly significant because completing one's route also means finishing one's work day. The fact is that working hours vary greatly, despite attempts to keep individual productivity at the same level, productivity measured not by volume of mail delivered but time necessary to deliver it for each route or zone. While most mail carriers complete their route between 12:30 and 2pm (already a fairly wide interval), some only get back to the sorting center at 4pm, perhaps later.⁶ The longest days are also those worked by the mail carriers least familiar with their routes. In fact, the mail carriers who work the longest, i.e., get back to the center latest, are those known as "rouleurs" [rollers] who go from one route to another substituting for absent permanent mail carriers. Not only are "rouleurs" new to the job,⁷ they are also sent into zones they have little or no familiarity with. They don't have the practical knowledge necessary to grasp the specificities of the route they're doing and are particularly vulnerable to unforeseen incidents: addresses or mailboxes that can't be found, dissatisfied customers, contradictory information from local inhabitants. This presents a threat to the

⁴ Each mail carrier leaves the distribution center with a load of approximately twenty kilos, then periodically takes on new mail from boxes located at various spots on the route that have been supplied by a colleague in a car.

⁵ Many parameters are taken into account and attributed fixed durations: average time of trips between the sorting center and route locale (depends on distance), speed while delivering (depends on linear density of housing or distribution points), number of mailboxes per building (depends on type of housing, single-family or apartments), overall route length (depends on how widely dispersed dwellings are and state of the roads), etc. Mode of locomotion are taken into account in estimating the durations (on foot, bicycle, moped, car) and whether the territory in question is rural or urban.

⁶ We noted one return at 5:20 pm and were told of even later ones.

⁷ Carriers have to have been on the job at least one year before they can become route holders (route allocation mechanisms are presented in the second part of the article).

goal of error-free delivery. These carriers have to be doubly careful, constantly check their actions, closely attend to customer demands, try to behave like the permanent, route-holding carriers, and meeting all these requirements also slows their work pace.

It is therefore by stretching out the work day that job skills are acquired, and by the same mechanism that each route becomes “readable” and each route zone is appropriated. Mastering mail delivery is a question of time—the learning time that has to be put in as a “rouleur”—and it also allows for saving time—the time of the experienced permanent route-holding mail carrier. Differences between theoretical and real working time (differences which may also be of the opposite sort: less rather than more time spent) are tolerated by the company because productivity is measured independently of length of working day. It will become clear further on how disparities among mail carriers are regulated and organized by the professional group and tolerated and appropriated by its members.

1.2. Operating procedures and service reliability

Mail delivery work is framed by imperatives and procedural norms in such a way as to produce uniform, standardized service, clear and predictable for the customer; that is, reliable. Many of the mail carriers we met with—also the team leaders and managers—were explicitly proud of the service’s reliability: “every piece of mail arrives at its destination,” they affirmed. But reliability is not the mere result of a work ethic—sometimes called “the religion of the letter”—that seemingly effaces all possibility of deviance; it is also based on detailed regulations.

Mail delivery, an apparently ordinary activity that consists of slipping envelopes into mailboxes that bear addressee’s name, is defined by a procedural code whose basic rule is that the mail carrier is the only one officially permitted to handle the mail.⁸ The mail carrier also delivers a number of specific objects—certified or registered letters, postal money orders, packages, taxed items—to be put directly into addressee hands, often in exchange for a signed receipt.⁹

Mail carriers’ hierarchical superiors identify non-normative conduct on the basis of customer complaints. These are handled by the team leader, who asks the mail carrier to explain, clarifies the situation with him or her, and works to categorize the incident. Complaints do not usually go to the top of the administrative hierarchy, and mail carriers are generally not sanctioned because the complaints are often vague and impossible to act on (customer affirms he or she was at home, whereas the mail carrier carefully noted exact time of passage on the notice left in customer’s mailbox) or they express dissatisfaction at mail carrier behavior that in fact perfectly followed regulations (a customer who protests at having to go to the post office to pick up a package that was indeed too big to fit in the mailbox).

Mail carriers seem to have a clear idea of how much latitude they have. They know how to avoid complaints, particularly by respecting certain rules which it would be dangerous to trans-

⁸ Not even “delivery facilitators” hired in the framework of France’s state youth employment program to ensure the safety and security of mail carriers working in difficult neighborhoods called “sensitive urban zones” are officially permitted to touch letters or packages.

⁹ Specific compulsory procedures have been drawn up to guarantee delivery of these special products. For example, a registered letter can be delivered to the addressee only or a third party with a proxy authorization; no one else, including any relative or other person close to the addressee, may receive it; mail carriers can leave addressees a notice that they have come through only after carefully checking that addressee is not at home, which means ringing or knocking several times; objects or envelopes too big or bulky to fit into mailboxes are to be taken to the post office after leaving addressee notice and must not be left in apartment building hallways or entrance areas.

gress, such as the prohibition to give registered mail to an unauthorized third party.¹⁰ Mail carriers' activity seems to have two sides to it. The first, generally spoken of in complaining tones, is how routine it is: repetitive tasks, the weight of rules and prescriptions. The second, which came through clearly in observation of delivery activity, is the diversity of operating modes, the rule-bending and breaking, and mail carriers' ways of holding fixed procedures at a distance. What may be presumed the most compulsory rules are regularly violated. For example, we observed mail carriers sign certified mail receipts themselves several times. For each transgression of this sort, the mail carrier justified his or her action in terms of personal knowledge of the addressee and addressee's situation: an elderly person in poor health whom the carrier wanted to spare the strain of a trip to the post office; a shopkeeper with a long line of customers whom the carrier wanted to save some time; a person the mail carrier has known for a long time and with whom he or she has an informal agreement. Mail carriers' familiarity with their customers reduces the risks inherent in these practices and thus the danger of incurring a complaint. Moreover, these arrangements are invariably justified by the desire to provide customer service, and they reflect a conception of service quality—the job well done—that is different from management's. Such practices may be, and are, considered breaches of the rules, of course. They are not, however, examples of individual bungling or misconduct—poor job performance—but rather a balancing of codified procedures with the actual situations encountered. And as attested by interviewees' frequent mention of them, they are the expression of collective practical knowledge inscribed in the history of the profession and generative of that history.

1.3. Commercial incentives and profitability

Opening mail delivery up to competition went together with managerial strategies aimed at integrating the mail sector of La Poste's activity, particularly mail carriers' activity, into the company's business goals and its attempt to turn a profit. The point was to consider mail carriers, who cover the whole of the national territory every day, as local interfaces in this business-oriented policy, and to use them to perform tasks related or relatable to mail delivery but also crucial to the financial balance and survival of the company. This means mail carriers have become components of a kind of commercial network, and as such they are assigned two sets of tasks.¹¹ The first is to look for potential clients with cash to invest and send them to La Poste's financial advisors. This activity has never taken the form of outright canvassing and remains very marginal and occasional (restricted to cases of the sort where a mail carrier learns that one of his or her customers has inherited or is about to).¹² The second is more immediately business-oriented: selling La Poste products, such as prestamped or ready-to-post

¹⁰ This sense of limits is not primarily a product of everybody's individual experience; it is more likely to be the trace of collective knowledge that cannot be reduced to rules fixed by the organization. Several carriers we met with recounted the anecdote of an anonymous colleague who supposedly delivered a registered letter to the addressee's wife even though she was not authorized to accept it. The contents—a summons to reimburse debts that the spouse didn't know existed—caused a conflict between husband and wife, husband lodged a complaint against the mail carrier, and carrier was sanctioned, "stripped" of his route.

¹¹ La Poste has further sought to increase its sales figures by getting a foothold in the advertising distribution market. Delivery of non-addressed mail is not an official part of the carrier's job, however, but rather a supplementary, optional activity that some do in the afternoons to increase their income.

¹² In fact, this activity usually falls to post office counter clerks, who are now called upon to detect potential clients on the basis of their La Poste bank account (Piotet, 2002).

envelopes (PAPs), while doing the mail route. Neither of these tasks is noted in the official job description and list of job responsibilities, primarily because the unions are against doing so. They nonetheless modify the contours of mail carrier activities, especially the second because it is measured and regulated by a management instrument: mail carriers have been given a “commission register” for noting all sales, and they receive a commission of 1%—a kind of profit-sharing arrangement. Though such business activity is not compulsory, it is being increasingly taken into account in annual employee evaluation interviews and affects the overall mark given as well as employee’s mobility, especially geographic mobility.

Still, selling La Poste products does not seem to have become a real feature of mail delivery. The financial takings are slim; hierarchical superiors’ instructions on the point are variable; even the most enthusiastic carriers spend only a limited amount of time selling; sales are not noted systematically in the registers; and some carriers even refuse to do sales work. Traditionally, mail carriers have always worked to facilitate user access to other postal services, such as stamps. But until now these activities were not considered by either the carriers themselves or management to be a commercial or business component of the job. Their meaning was not determined in relation to how “the company” was doing or its profit-making imperatives, but to customers, and to carriers’ personalized relations with them.

In this sense, introducing profitability criteria and oversight and management instruments corresponds to imposing on mail carriers a new definition of their work: what they considered to be personal—a matter of personally applying rules and regulations—and invisible to the organization has become normative, prescribed, and open to evaluation by hierarchical superiors. The marginal nature of sales activities indicates that carriers’ daily work has not been greatly affected, but carriers’ position in customer relations has been shifted because the company is trying to make itself felt in that relation. This shift is not yet fully accomplished—far from it—and mail carriers’ activities in the course of their routes are still largely distinct from what management norms would have them be, and continue to be nearly invisible to the organization because it greatly underestimates their relational component.

1.4. Variety of practices and customer relations

The mail route is not just the amount of time required to get the mail delivered or a set of formal procedures. It is also the weaving of relations with residents. It involves not only topographical, spatial, and building specificities, which internally differentiate the job of mail carrier, but also the people who live along the route, who are characterized by social memberships, lifestyles and life rhythms, and the relations that develop between mail carriers and these people, or at least some of them, since others are absent when the carrier passes. This relational dimension is not taken into account by the company, or if so, only by reducing inhabitants to target sales customers and the service relation to a market one.¹³ In our observa-

¹³ Another way of taking the relational dimensions of the delivery activity into account is reflected in the concern to protect carriers’ on-the-job safety and the security of their material (vehicles, mail). In territories classified “sensitive urban zones,” carriers may systematically leave notices for registered mail rather than go up flights of apartment building stairs and ring doorbells or knock on doors. This of course amounts to avoiding contact and interaction altogether.

tion, relations with customers varied by route and mail carrier but were nevertheless a constant, and they could play a structuring role in mail carriers' definitions of their job: "What makes up for the routine is getting to meet up with people. I know I couldn't keep at it without that, and I'm not the only one who feels this way"; "I was afraid of the repetition, doing the same route every day, but now I see that that's how you can have relations; that's what makes the work worthwhile, actually"; "You deliver mail, ok, but our work is also talking with people, exchanging a few words—next to nothing often, but we know how things are in the neighborhood, we belong to the neighborhood even if we don't live in it."

Many of these instances of contact are minimal: exchange of handwaves or nods across the street, a pat on the shoulder from a mailman as he goes by, silent handshakes. But they are part of acquaintanceship and give continuity to the relation. Others suggest more familiar relations, in which the mail carrier may be receiver (of a candy, a coin slipped into the postal jacket, or residents may call out carrier's first name) or initiator (asking about customers' health or that of their families, tossing out a compliment on the flowers in a customer's windowbox; showing interest in a new car parked in front of the house, etc.). These moments of contact are minor and they rarely lead to longer conversations. But they mark how mail carrier and customer take each other into account. Carriers repeatedly refer to "their customers," and the expression "He's my mailman/She's my mail-lady" is an integral part of ordinary language.¹⁴ Far from being trivial or insignificant for the carrier, these contacts are an integral part of their work, and constitute signs of membership in the profession. The relational dimension thus greatly overflows institutional definitions of what it means to give the customer good service. It even sometimes takes the form of additional small personalized services: withdrawing cash for customers; making a detour to deliver a letter that the customer has indicated is important; adapting oneself to the hours that customers keep even to the point of modifying one's itinerary; taking down a dictated letter; deciphering a bill or an administrative document; bringing a customer some bread, etc. Such services, infrequent in our observation, are an extreme indication of the value that carriers attribute to relational work, even though that work is not adequately taken into account in management norms or is in any case strictly defined and limited by them.

La Poste uses a number of management instruments to norm mail carrier behavior, but these prove not to have much resonance or effect (Boussard, 2001). The idea is to measure workloads and intensity in order to stimulate and control productivity, but the measuring and estimating has little effect on actual hours worked, which remain extremely varied. The idea is to make service reliable by ensuring application of procedural rules and handling customer complaints, but this formal system has not put an end to violations, which, as mentioned, are defended as service improvements. The notion of profitability has been introduced through incentives to sell services (namely, as mentioned, the carrier sales commission), but these business imperatives are not really effective; they have not really modified the contours of delivery activity. Lastly, the relational dimension of the service, though disregarded by the company, is at the heart of mail carriers' definitions of their work, a constant that takes varied forms in professional practice, as will be shown see further on.

¹⁴ We were not able to interview or survey residents, but during our investigations, particularly when filming a carrier on his or her route, some called out to us in such terms as "He's my mailman—don't give him a hard time, ok?" and "Anita is a mail-lady like no other—she's the best".

2. Collective regulation: the weight of seniority

A number of carrier behaviors are not integrated into company goals and flourish outside organizational prescriptions. These cannot, however, be considered the result of personal judgments; rather they are shared within the “group that makes up a real professional community at La Poste” (Lallement, 2000). One sign that this community exists is the remarkable historical continuity of the job. The term *facteur* [translated here as mail carrier] has resisted would-be modernizing attempts to change it to “postal employee” (Chenu, 1994). More tangibly, this community is kept intact by collective regulations which organize and socialize individual mail carrier practices. Differences in working conditions and job activity contexts are distributed in accordance with a professional hierarchy determined and monitored by the professional group; that hierarchy is defined by seniority and it ensures that the most experienced carriers get the most enviable situations while beginners get the most difficult. This in turn ensures everyone the prospect of job improvement, in a way that what is called career management cannot.

2.1. Learning on the job

Rookie mail carriers work longer hours. Their slight experience at the route is compensated for by longer time spent doing it. Official training time is spent memorizing the procedures that are understood to guarantee reliable mail delivery, error and incident-free, without mail loss or misdelivery. But the training does not reflect any awareness of the real conditions in which the activity is performed (Clot et al., 2000). New carriers learn by practice, on the job. Novices—“rouleurs”—substitute for more experienced carriers, and they have no choice but to change routes regularly, sometimes from one day to the next, within the perimeter covered by their post office.

Starting out in the profession, then, not only means not having any experience-acquired skills but also having to face difficulties and trials that are unpredictable from one day to the next, unstable contexts and uncomfortable, difficult-to-handle situations. The accounts of those new to the job, whatever the period of time they refer to, emphasize the loneliness and isolation of the novice faced with performing minimally specified tasks. Those interviewed say they had questions and doubts about their coping abilities and whether they were good enough:

When I was getting started, I was afraid, anxious, that I wouldn't be a good mailperson, something like that. ... It seems stupid now, but in the beginning they give you routes you don't know and it makes you anxious; you're afraid of making mistakes, coming back with mail, not knowing things, and you see the others doing it with the greatest of ease—it makes you wonder about yourself (mailwoman, started the job in 1996).

When I first started working at the PTT—years ago, but I still remember, it's engraved right here [indicating his forehead]. [Interviewer: Is that so?] Right, because I thought I wouldn't be able to get used to it. The sense that there's too much mail, and then being scared stiff to mess up—I'm telling you, scared stiff (mailman, started the job in 1978).

The learning process is painful because newcomers are alone on their routes and can only count on sporadic support from their experienced counterparts. Mutual assistance does exist in practice, however: carriers with a permanent route keep a “route notebook” in which they note down for the non- or not-yet permanent colleagues who replace them any information that might be helpful to them in adjusting to the singularity of the given territory. Some give more information than others, but the notebooks include topography details, map sketches, drawings of potentially difficult spots,¹⁵ and information about customers and their habits.¹⁶ The route notebook presents elements of the specific experience of each carrier, information about how he or she works, and a list of “tricks of the trade” applicable only to the route in question.

These notebooks are not normed or even framed by the company. They represent a type of mutual support which, because it is indirect and variable, does not really eliminate the trials and tribulations specific to starting a new job. Novices find themselves in hard working conditions, and they have to go through this experience before becoming accomplished, recognized professionals. This way of learning, fully established and ineluctable, works to strengthen the continuity of how the job is defined over time, how it is defined despite changes in profile of new mail carriers. The distinction between permanent and not-yet-permanent mail carriers has recognized symbolic power, since for all carriers we spoke to, being a carrier means having one’s own route. And it is of crucial importance because it differentiates those who have a zone in which they are autonomous from those who do not. It is therefore necessary to examine how this boundary is drawn and controlled and how one becomes the official holder of a mail route.

2.2. *Starting up in the profession by “buying” one’s zone*

It is at the level of the distribution center that routes are allocated to mail carriers, i.e., permanent route-holders and “rouleurs” with at least one year on the job.¹⁷ Routes are distributed through what is called a biannual “zone sale.”¹⁸ The proceedings are codified in detail. Two weeks before the day set for the sale, two lists are posted, the first of available mail routes; the second of who gets to bid for or “buy” the routes in what order, with order strictly determined by seniority. On sale day, a team leader announces each vacant mail route and runs down the list of carrier names. Each carrier calls out his or her choice; after “buying” a route, he or she can give it up for another further down the list. The inflexibility of speaking order

¹⁵ Notebooks point out, for example, a not immediately visible pathway between two apartment buildings, meaning there’s no need to go around; a shortcut through a hole in a fence; an alley too narrow to turn around in on a bicycle, so that it’s preferable to go in on foot; a mailbox hidden under a hedge; concealed or effaced street numbers, and the like.

¹⁶ Among customer routines or characteristics noted: the day a shop is closed (useful to know when delivering registered mail); the fact that this or that resident is handicapped, which means entering the house to drop off the mail; the meaning of signals given by certain residents (e.g., a white rag attached to the gate is to be understood as an invitation to ring the bell).

¹⁷ The first year on the job after passing the competitive entrance examination is conceived as a training year, but novices never work in twos. After a brief training period in which they are taught formal procedures, they are sent out on routes as substitutes for permanent route holders. Until recently this arrangement only applied to permanent civil servants; contract workers were not allowed routes but were instead permanent “rouleurs”.

¹⁸ The practice was formally defined by administrative texts in the 1940S, but it is older still. See the *Bulletin Officiel du Ministère des Postes, Télégraphe et Téléphone* for 1943 and 1945, Imprimerie Nationale.

leads carriers to dissimulate their personal strategies, and this in turn introduces suspense and uncertainty until the end of the sale. Keeping one's real choice secret seems like the best way of not arousing envy on the part of colleagues with more seniority. The tension is therefore high as the ritual is played out; the same "rouleur" often successively tries for several routes, at first "buying" any one, just to become an official holder, then trying to obtain the route he or she has preselected.

The "zone sale" is a ceremony that brings to the fore the internal group hierarchy, determined as a function of seniority and determining degree of power to choose a route. Not only does a greater amount of work experience have the effect of lightening the load and constraints of mail delivery, but the most experienced carriers can take the least difficult routes while the rookies are doomed to settle for the least attractive, those that their seniors have discarded. Meanwhile, the ritual constitutes a periodic manifestation of group cohesion: each route "purchase" by a "rouleur" gives rise to a visible show of delight on his or her part and applause and congratulations from the assembled colleagues. Taking official "possession" of a route thus appears a genuine rite of passage, pertaining not only to the new carrier but the group as a whole. "Buying" a route is a decisive step in the career, since only those with their own route are considered and consider others to be real carriers, professionals in the full sense of the term.

Having a route—"owning" it, as some put it—is a salient feature of the carrier profession; being a route "owner" is a trait that one acquires definitively, barring major sanction for serious misconduct (destroying mail, receiving repeated complaints regarding registered mail, etc.).¹⁹ Moving up the promotion path toward the level of team leader also means "losing one's route" because one must first become "sector carrier," i.e., supervise a small team of carriers and substitute for them when they are absent or have other difficulties (Bras, 1993). The fact is that mail carriers are reluctant to become what they call "super-rouleurs," to the point that there are actually not enough candidates for promotion to team leader. Lastly, the company has little influence when it comes to ensuring that carriers have "equal" routes. Its role with regard to job distribution mechanisms is minimal; in "zone sales" it goes no further than ensuring correct procedures, having no influence on this way of regulating carrier work.²⁰ The company is having difficulty attracting carriers into high-level supervisory functions because that implies giving up one's "own" route, and it only sanctions in cases of serious misconduct.

2.3. Getting a "good" route and settling into it

The tie between carrier and route is close and personal but also staged, dramatized. These two characteristics are at the core of professional group regulation, for they mark both group cohesion and segmentation. All route-holding carriers are in fact equal, enjoy equal status, precisely because each has "his/her" route. At the same time, accumulating experience and seniority automatically opens prospects of improving that condition, either by increasing familiarity

¹⁹ Mail carriers are sometimes suspended or dismissed from delivery service for serious misconduct, such as embezzlement or alcoholic intemperance. The frequency of such offences has significantly decreased in recent decades.

²⁰ The mechanism for allocating routes appears as an advantage proceeding out of the "exchange logic" characteristic of corporatist systems (Segrestin, 1985, Schwartz, 1997), with low pay and promotion options compensated for by the possibility of settling into a route and the increase in available choices that comes with seniority.

with the route or allowing for purchase of a better one, and of “horizontal” advancement (Becker, 1952). The tension between equality and difference is very real because there is no unequivocal, explicit ordering of mail routes by attractiveness; this is instead a matter of interpretation, though there is likely to be consensus about which routes are “lousy” and “to be avoided.”²¹

There is therefore no specification or overall consensus about what a “good” route is. A positive assessment may be based on a great variety of criteria: transportation mode, type of housing, number of addresses to be delivered to, habits of people in the neighborhood, how much money calendar sales bring in. The characteristics are diverse and not all mail carriers consider them equally important. Some prefer delivering on foot, others are more sensitive to type of housing, some are particularly concerned about work-day length, others about size of “Christmas boxes” to be expected.

It is hard to categorize vacant routes because there isn’t much information about them and what there is may be imprecise or concealed by permanent route holders. Assessing takings from calendar sales is a good example: mail carriers do not communicate these figures to each other, especially since sales that are not market sales seem increasingly disparaged and discouraged.²² Moreover, the specifics of a given route often depend on how its holder organizes and shapes it. While some carriers work energetically at selling calendars and make a significant amount of money that way (in some cases more than €4500, i.e., more than a fourth of their yearly salary), others refuse to make any attempt to sell, sticking strictly to satisfying customer demand for calendars, while still others won’t engage in any such activity at all. Mail carriers have various ways of interpreting the selling activity: as a custom indissociable from this particular professional culture, as remuneration for personal services performed during the year, as an outdated tradition inherited from the former postal administration, or as a degrading request for charity (Cartier, 2000).

How, then, to be sure that one will have abundant “Christmas boxes,” a quick mail route, that contacts with inhabitants will be gratifying? The answers to these questions are always ambiguous because the information is vague or concealed and routes cannot be dissociated from those who do them: “Route 9 is fast because Albert does it, it’s his experience that you see at work. You can’t be sure another carrier could do it in the same amount of time”; “Not everyone’s got a relational side to them, so you can’t say that the zone customers are nice; I mean it’s a relation, you know.” The category “good route” remains vague or polysemous, varying by carrier interpretation or assessment.

The mode of allocating routes results in a vague matching of carrier preferences and routes, especially since there are often not many vacant routes up for “sale.” Route-holders tend to hold onto their routes because it’s hard to identify “good” ones clearly; also because this uncertainty generates a particularly high risk if one has been doing a route for a long time. Each route change implies learning the new route in a new work situation and carries with it the danger of disappointment. In one way, all mail carriers are in the same situation: they are all indeed in

²¹ These expressions refer to a shared collective ranking within each distribution center; they designate precise if heterogeneous attributes: routes called “parcel routes” that involve package delivery and correspond to a wider perimeter (also described as “very long,” “unending”) and routes in “hard neighborhoods” where contact with the local population is at a minimum, carrier security not well ensured, and job interest low. Such routes are clearly, explicitly, consistently rejected by route holders.

²² Calendar sales by garbage collectors, for example, were prohibited in Paris in the early 1990s.

the profession; that is, all have access to various resources indissociable from the indigenous, collectively guaranteed definition of the mail carrier's job. Being a route holder means being able to follow routines that will save time and improve delivery reliability, developing relational contacts that will enrich work tasks and increase customer satisfaction, and supplementing income by selling calendars, which only route holders can do. A "good" route is thus a route that the carrier can fashion himself or herself. The content of this indigenous category is not homogeneous or general; rather it expresses a relation to the job, and it combines a refusal to reduce that job to a set of formal procedures with a positive affirmation of its relational dimension.

As we have seen, mail carriers' work is organized and allocated by collective rules distinct from the norms promoted by management, and it is marked by the strength of the professional group. Novices start out in the most difficult assignments, changing incessantly from one neighborhood disdained by their more experienced colleagues to another. The fact that learning is on the job, often in stressful conditions, ensures equality of entrance conditions, and this fact blurs the growing heterogeneity of beginner profiles. As explained, route allocation is governed by the seniority rule and is carried out in a ritual ceremony that reminds each participant of his or her rank within the group. Access to a better route is thus a central issue in a mail carrier's career, and having one leads—at different paces—to "owning" what is judged a "good" route; i.e., one which the carrier can organize in his or her own way using activity strategies that correspond to his or her conception of the job and profession. It is therefore important to examine differentiation among carriers' activity strategies and their ways of identifying and defining the work of covering a mail route.

3. Work meanings and activity strategies

The way mail delivery work is organized ensures carriers a degree of autonomy in managing their territory as they develop routines and relations and shape their work activity. Professional practices, in particular relations with customers, are therefore diverse, as our observation confirms. In the biographical interviews, centered on the activities and professional trajectories of eighteen mail carriers in the two sorting centers studied, we sought to get interviewees to make their ways of working explicit, define themselves professionally, how they valued (or didn't value) certain tasks, services, relations. The interviews were organized around reactions to work situations, either mentioned by the interviewee or presented to him or her by the interviewer, and they led carriers to develop and produce arguments in defense of their conceptions of the right way of doing the job, the right way to be a mail carrier. The method encouraged position taking and defining. The positions do not necessarily correspond exactly to observed behavior; rather they express the meanings with which daily activity are invested. We proceeded this way because the meanings of the job are closely tied to the possibility of investing it with personal values and enacting these in behavior on the route and interactions with residents. It is worthwhile noting that this ability is seldom part of work life for low-level task performers or civil servants.

Consequently, the interview material was analyzed with a view to identifying the arguments most central to job definition. Three dimensions gradually emerged as crucial and transversal: definition of tasks that carrier; value attributed to relations with inhabitants, and carrier's relation to the company and its strategic directions. In each interview, the positions taken reflect a line of reasoning and show discursive coherence. Comparing the results obtained enabled us to distinguish four types of discourse, four arguments, each in favor of a different guiding strat-

egy for work activity. This typology does not exhaust the range of possible ways of being a mail carrier and doing the job because certain types of territory, such as rural routes and routes serving housing projects, were not present in the sample. However, our set of interviewees did present significantly different social and generational characteristics.

3.1. A “marketman out on his territory”

The first type of argument involves devaluing a major part of mail carrier’s activities, from the morning sorting procedure to getting the mail into mailboxes. The carrier is defined as a “machine,” a cog in an assembly line for handling letter flow, and is assigned an unvarying function, implying repetitive motions along the same path:

I’ve been doing it a few years and it’s not what I’d call fascinating work, sorting mail every day, getting set to go out, loading up the bicycle, doing the route, going along the same streets, then coming back the same way. That’s what it is, though—a routine. And the next day you start all over again with a new pack of mail. ... That’s the basics, you’ve got to do it, you’ve got to. But if you stop there, you get really bored. The way I see it, we’re like automatic distribution machines.

The term “distribution machines” designates the least noble part of the work, the basic routine activities that threaten to invade occupational life as a whole. Opposed to this is the small space available for personal investment, a space opened by the company; namely, the sale of company products. Though the company prescribes this activity, it is perceived as a possibility of acting on one’s own initiative and an opportunity to show how well one can perform. The carrier becomes a genuine “marketeer,” even though his or her sales activities take place in the interstices of mail delivery work:

What counts is being able to sell PAPs. That’s a plus—not for the bonuses, or not *only* for the bonuses, let’s say. It also means getting greater satisfaction ... If you don’t do the route you can’t do the sales, because that’s where you’ve got the contact, the trust. In fact I’m a marketman out on my territory; all day long I plough the same field, and then it’s harvest time.

Business and sales activities do not efface delivery activities; indeed, the latter condition the former. And they only take up a short amount of time. But they give meaning to the work. The activity strategy of attaining sales goals also corresponds to support of the company’s strategic bent in favor of competition and profitability. This support is manifested in approval of the contests organized among carriers and sorting centers to see who can bring in the most in sales of La Poste products. Business logic and objectives are valued because they open up a space for carrier involvement and mobilization:

We have to do sales, though actually I’ve got a lot of colleagues who don’t do much, they stick to their old habits, as you can see with the contests, which they set up to make people get moving a bit. ... During a certain period of time there’s a contest, for something like sales of Chronopost. I’ve already won it twice. It makes you feel valued.

Emphasizing product sales and defining oneself as a salesperson means showing one’s skill and ability to succeed, one’s personal value, i.e., one’s competitiveness and fitness for competition. These arguments go together with the carrier’s hope of winning hierarchical superiors’ recognition of individual merit and confidence in the company and thereby opening up greater

career possibilities for oneself, despite the formal nature of the aptitude evaluation procedures that have replaced the traditional competitive examinations as official means of professional promotion. Carriers are familiar with career advancement avenues and possibilities, and this enables them to realistically calculate their prospects of changing positions, or jobs altogether, becoming sector carrier, team leader, financial advisor, mail-handling advisor for businesses, even executive manager of a post office or future “manager”.

In this activity strategy, carrier’s relation with the company is of greater importance than relations with customers, who are in turn considered sales targets. They are of course not an undifferentiated agglomeration or a mass of anonymous individuals, because being an effective salesman presupposes having and keeping up local contacts. Knowing the inhabitants and being known to them, keeping track of their names and a few of their habits, are potential resources for the “marketman.” All residents are considered potential clients from the moment the carrier has an opportunity to meet them—by ringing their doorbell to deliver a certified letter, for example. They are indeed “customers” in the generic, weak sense used by most carriers, but also in the marketing sense of “consumers,” as was expressed by one of our interviewees, concerned to “develop” a “loyal” “clientele”:

I always try to manage my clientele. My basic principle is that once I can get one positive response, I’ve got to make them into a loyal customer. That means being sure the customer’s happy and then suggesting new products to them. If this works, then they could even start asking *me* about things—when that happens, things are good. The other thing is to widen the clientele, make more catches to enlarge your group.

This conception of carrier activity was encountered in four interviews, all with men, all relatively new to the company (2 to 7 years), most with a relatively high educational level (above French high school degree in three cases), and in fact all recent route holders.

3.2. *A human-contact job*

In this second type, carrier activity is defined with reference to customers of different sorts. Mail delivery is only marginal in these narratives: doing one’s route without making any mistakes is an obligation that is taken for granted, goes without saying. The route is defined as first and foremost a social space where “contacts” are made with “people.” The main if not only attraction of the job lies in these exchanges, which break up the monotony of the work, inscribe the carrier in a social territory, and mark recognition of a job well done. Recurrent use of the expression “a human-contact job” underlines the importance attributed to sociability of this sort:

What I like is the talking-with-everyone aspect of the job. Because really, the mailperson is someone. I don’t mean someone important, just familiar. What I enjoy is feeling good in my neighborhood, you know, with the people. And giving that back, you know. I mean, you’ve got a role to play in the place you work, something extra in the contacts. You can’t deny it, we’ve got a human-contact job [laughs] and I love that.

The contact is not just a source of enjoyment for the carrier; it’s also an activity directed toward the inhabitants, a service that the carrier produces. In this connection, customers are carefully differentiated, because above and beyond the carrier’s general surface courtesy, certain customers receive particular attention, personalized extra services such as putting the mail

in the house, doing small errands or taking care of administrative procedures, even filling out forms and writing letters. These tasks, which clearly go beyond the carrier's official duties, are oriented toward isolated individuals with reduced physical autonomy or social difficulties (the elderly, sick, or handicapped). The carrier is a recourse, a last resort, for these "persons who can't take care of themselves," a role similar to first-level social work, though informal and invisible.

The most important for me is to be able to help those who need it. You can't imagine the things you discover when you're familiar with your route. If you're even slightly attentive, you realize you can give service for plenty of things ... I do it without pretensions, as I can. But I wonder what it means to be a mail carrier if you don't take care of people who can't take care of themselves.

The company has nothing to do with these practices, which are deliberately oriented toward inhabitants and justified in terms of "need," or with this activity strategy. And the strategy is not recognized by the carrier's hierarchical superiors; on the contrary, they communicate business injunctions and profitability demands, though sometimes without much enthusiasm. For those in favor of this strategy, this way of being a mail carrier seems contradictory and incompatible with the company's current emphases and direction. They therefore feel unrecognized, even disparaged, made to feel as if they are engaging in a superseded, devalued practice, one that they consider increasingly necessary:

What's really a shame is the pressure they put on you to get more done and make more sales. What counts for them is what you sell, period. But that's not what accounts for people's satisfaction with their mail carrier. It's the kind word, it's being at their service, helping out those who need it. But that doesn't count. Taking care of someone—you don't have time for that, they tell you. That's not your job, they say.

Performing services and making oneself more generally available are at the heart of the activity for these carriers; this is what makes the work meaningful, despite the fact that relating to customers in this way has been devalued. We encountered this general conception of the job in five interviews. The interviewees in this case had in common an average degree of seniority (between 6 and 17 years in the job) and gender (4 out of 5 were women), as well as a significant amount of non-job time spent in volunteer, educational, or social work.

3.3. A tradesman managing his business

This third strategy is explicitly opposed to La Poste management modes, evaluation criteria, and normative injunctions. The carriers who use it reduce the organizational framework to a set of supervisory rules defined by executive managers who are entirely ignorant of what's involved in mail delivery work and passed on or down by a hierarchy of "little bosses." In this type of narrative, the company appears a threat that could get in the way of professional work, with the idea that the carriers are the only ones who know their real work, the only ones with operative, practical knowledge. This activity strategy is thus based on holding company pressure off and conquering one's autonomy, as facilitated by certain job conditions:

What I like is my freedom. On the route I do what I like the way I like it. No boss on my back. I get myself organized and don't have to account for myself, I'm free. That's why I'm still a mail carrier, for the freedom, a thing you can't find elsewhere. They can do what

they want up there; they put verifiers on us, they want to oversee us. The last thing was the commissions register. We just laugh. They don't see that once you get out into the open you're your own master.

This claim of mail carrier "freedom" involves not only a refusal to be overseen but a specific way of handling the clientele that goes beyond maintaining a "good image." The autonomy cited is used within a specific space of relations with a segment of the clientele, persons considered "buddies almost." Who are they and what are these near-friendship relations the carrier has with them? The customers in question are generally shopkeepers, tradespersons, small self-employed or franchise operators, for whom the carrier provides tailor-made services, adapting to their hours, coming through in their emergencies, satisfying their demands (delivering La Poste products, sending and stamping mail) or performing services unrelated to the job (getting a fine taken care of, for example). In return, they get free services for themselves or price reductions on goods that go beyond the usual "Christmas bonus" (e.g., haircuts, discounted insurance premiums, stereo system repair):

I've got the haircutter, the *tabac* [café selling tobacco and stamps], the charcuter, the insurance man, the printer, and that's not all. We all know each other and we back each other up. ... I'm talking about little things that circulate between us. We've become like buddies almost, in all this time, and inevitably it's "you give me this, I'll give you that" for all those things. As for me in it all, I don't have a shop but it's as good as if—it's a circuit between us.

Such arrangements imply developing exchange networks based on a shared sense of this kind of dealings and trust of the sort that develops among peers, fellows. The mail carrier becomes a kind of small local service provider, the equivalent of a shopkeeper or other self-employed, far from being a public postal service civil servant. These personal service exchanges are often euphemized (carriers speak of small services, little nothings, little things) and they are kept hidden from superiors and colleagues. Nonetheless, they constitute the foundation of professional self-identification: the carrier lays claim to the identity of small business entrepreneur, a "tradesman" managing his affairs, a way of saying that the company and the organization framework that manage carrier's activity are being ignored or rather neutralized:

So there you have it, I've got this thing for lending a hand, getting good tips on things, exchanges like that that go on. I've got my little system, runs smoothly, no one's the wiser. That's what I like in the job, the do-what-you-like aspect. I mean you've got to know what you're doing, you've got to acquire the experience. But then it's a little like a tradesman managing his business—yes, that's it. I've developed my little system and it works well.

This activity strategy was presented in three interviews with carriers who display sharply similar traits: all men, relatively old (over 46), long time on the job (more than 15 years, in two cases over 25 years), low educational attainment level (no higher than a vocational degree), on the same route for more than 15 years.

3.4. *Just postal workers*

The last activity strategy corresponds to a professional position halfway between customers and the company. It seems to involve less subjective engagement on the part of the individuals

who referred to it; it's less clearly expressed, not contrasted with alternatives, not said to go against supposedly contradictory forces, as if it represented a basic, minimal attitude, one without reference to any contradictions or hostility within the company or the professional group. If the carriers who expressed this idea seemed less absorbed with it, this is surely because it is hard to represent it in terms of specific practices spontaneously engaged in on the margins of delivery tasks proper. The three other strategies give stronger expression to ways of shaping one's mail route; that is, categorizing customers (as sales targets; people who can't help themselves, almost buddies) and positioning oneself in relation to the company (approval of the profitability concern; resistance to the general abandonment of mail carrier's social role; pulling away from the source of oversight and constraint).

Here customers are considered receivers of the activity and as such are understood to have legitimate demands for service quality, which may be defined variously as reliability of mail delivery (no lost or misdelivered mail), regularity (professional routine), and carrier's accessibility (pleasant on-the-job attitude). These ordinary expectations involve a conception of the postal service that values standardization in the name of equal treatment of customers. Such normalizing does not efface the particularities of each route; rather it involves a larger reference to "public service." Customers in this perspective are sometimes referred to as "users," and they become a "public" with legitimate expectations which the carrier must satisfy:

I don't know, but it seems to me that we're, you know, first and foremost a public service—it's perhaps worthwhile to say that. I'm not here to claim a privilege or anything, but it's a fact, you know, and it's ... it's an extra weight on us, an obligation I mean, because we're serving the public. We've got to give quality service. If we don't there's really not any reason for us to exist.

Carriers following this strategy describe or rather prescribe relations with "the public" very generally, not necessarily taking into account actual contact with the persons living on or around the route. Those relations carry a symbolic load, rather, one that is sufficient to govern a conception of the carrier profession centered on the value attributed to the content of such relations and their "vector"—the mail. Letters are considered a highly dignified product, one that deserves attentive consideration and gives social value to the postal service and the delivery task. More broadly, it's the entire mail-handling chain that is being dignified. This means that the carriers identify themselves with the "postal service worker" world, defining themselves as "just postal workers":

We've got something like the best part to play because we're the ones who people see. Sometimes it's kind of difficult, actually, but usually things work well. It has to be remembered, though, that what makes La Poste is all the postal workers together! All the guys who sort the mail at night, drive the trucks—it's all that. We're just postal workers like the others. Mail carriers, ok, but basically, we're postal workers.

In this category, then, the feeling of belonging to a specific profession is weak: being a mail carrier is being almost just another postal worker. And mobility into other functions in the mail department (letter/package supervisor) or outside it (counter clerk) is looked on as a possible way to a new job. La Poste is here considered a space of identification that extends across jobs, and of career mobility; in this group, mail carrier autonomy is not considered an advantage that must be preserved at all costs particularly since it is under threat. In fact, these carriers are highly sensitive to the contradiction between attachment to public service and rela-

tions with users on the one hand, modernizing policies that give priority to profit-taking and sales results on the other:

I wonder, I really do, when I see what they want to make us do. Sell, sell, sell. A whole bunch of things outside what our work is. No more respect for people, that's how it is now. They've got to get their hands on their money—yes, that's how it is now. ... If it keeps on like this, the mailman's smile will soon be a salesman's smile.

This activity strategy was identified in five of our interviews. The corresponding interviewees do not share specific sociodemographic, professional itinerary, or gender characteristics, except for those with the highest educational level (more than two years of post-high school education) who have been working more than 20 years at what is now La Poste.

As mentioned, these four characterizations typical of mail carriers correspond to specific relations to customers and views of company management norms. They represent not only the trace of professional values and beliefs but also ways of shaping mail route work that fuel daily practices and are fueled by them. They are not independent of biographical characteristics such as degree of seniority, age, sex, or educational level, characteristics which in turn are related to the moment a mail carrier came on to the job and entry conditions for La Poste employees (Bertaux-Wiame et al., 1999). Each type of customer relation involves a position or stance with regard to the regulations instituted by either the company or the professional community. More specifically, some of the strategies fit with the business imperatives promoted by management, others on the contrary with the principles maintained by the professional group, whereas yet others are out of joint with both these rule sources and under present circumstances are not officially recognized or considered legitimate. The figure of the employee (young and with a relatively high educational degree) who takes responsibility for his or her own job activity and sales figures is of course promoted by the company strategy, focused on commercial profitability; that of the independent worker (male, experienced) profiting personally from his activity is maintained by professional group structure and distribution of job assignments on a seniority basis. But the other route-shaping modes, which lie somewhere in between these two polar figures and are both dominant and legitimate, though for very different reasons, are more fragile, under threat. Mail carriers who wish to have a social function and those identifying themselves with public service—carriers, that is, who are close to neither the older and better settled fraction of the profession or the best-educated and most favorable to the shift toward business imperatives— are managing to maintain and realize their own, different activity strategies, but their professional autonomy is marked by the surrounding disregard for this emphasis, by absence of recognition for the way they work and the results it produces.

4. Conclusion

Mail delivery is a composite, heterogeneous activity that combines physical lifting and handling and “contact” work with customers. But mail carriers' work can be considered an example of a service job, given the degree to which those who do it value route work and contacts with customers, both of these situated at a distance from the organization. This means that even though carriers are not ranked by INSEE [Institut National de Statistique et d'Etudes Economiques] as a “personal services” occupational category, they can be considered an example of “basic administrative employees” with a “degree of discretionary latitude in determin-

ing the nature, monetary amount, and quality of the advantages offered and sanctions distributed by their service” (Lipsky 1982). We have shown the various forms this service relation may take, which may be designated thus: for the marketman out on the territory, selling market services; for the human-contact conception, performing services; for the tradesperson managing his own business, exchanging personal services; and for “just postal workers,” belonging to the public service.

More generally, studying mail carriers’ work sheds light on small service jobs, namely those that involve relations with users, customers, or citizens—the term used varies depending on fluctuating official terminology and administrative organizations. Their situation is in many ways exemplary, because their work takes them far away from any in-house service window or institutional arrangement, out of both bosses’ and peers’ sight, and they consequently enjoy a great degree of autonomy in producing the service of mail delivery, a degree of autonomy particularly remarkable given their low rank in the division of labor. Despite this autonomy, however, called by some “independence” or “freedom,” our observations suggest that study of these jobs, particularly service relations, cannot be focused mainly on interactions between employees and customers; these interactions cannot be considered an independent, self-contained object of research (Weller 1998).

Indeed, our results show that the service produced *in situ* should be referred back to 1) the institutional organization as source of the management norms that regulate and frame but also reshape the service over time and in response to managerial directions and policies; 2) the professional community as source of collective regulation; it maintains a traditional definition of the job activity while controlling work distribution and how the internal hierarchy is defined; 3) the actors engaged in interactions as sources of activity strategies who in practice support differentiated conceptions of the work but have also come onto the job under various conditions and at different moments in its history and development. The point is less to try to reconcile localized and relational situations with the weight of social and formal structures by means of a more or less abstract schema than to contextualize empirical analyses of service relations, analyze localized work without cutting it off from the situation (Goffman 1983), from what constructs, frames, and organizes that work. In this respect, the way the three levels of analysis fit together here is delicate, but they do represent a way of studying the content of overly abstract, homogenizing categories such as “public jobs,” “service jobs,” or even “public service jobs.”

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