The digital firm in the mainframe age – computer use and business at ASEA, 1955–1976

Paper for presentation at Teknik- och vetenskapshistoriska dagarna, Lund, April 2015.

Gustav Sjöblom, Chalmers University of Technology

This paper is a study of the adoption and use of digital computing at the electrical engineering firm ASEA in the age of mainframe computing, from the first use of the digital computer BESK in 1955 to the breakthrough of microelectronics in the latter half of the 1970s. I argue that computer use became critical at an early stage – by the late 1960s ASEA used relied on computers for CAD, material and production control, producing costing, accounting, payroll, management control, in control systems for machine tools and industrial robots, and embedded in installations delivered to the power, paper and steel industries. While the previous scholarship has treated the mainframe age primarily as a Fordist dead end, I point to the importance of an incremental process of digitalization with learning loops and path dependencies, to some extent dissolving the distinction between Fordism and post-Fordism. The paper is based on extensive research in the archives of ASEA and the Stockholms Enskilda Bank as well as oral history interviews and contemporary press.