

From Our Readers

An Opinion... "Personal Computers for DSS"

It is unseemly to mix scholarship and realpolitik and this is probably the reason why the stimulating and scholarly article of Hackathorn and Keen in the September 1981 issue of the *MIS Quarterly* fails to discuss one of the serious organizational hurdles to overcome when using personal computers in DSS. I am referring to the problem of how managers can obtain money to buy personal computers as an aid to their managerial work.

Hackathorn and Keen present three prongs to organizational strategy. The first advocates standardization. The second a systematic introduction to personal computers. "The economic aspect...should be analyzed," "...the purchasing...should be controlled uniformly..." The third prong stresses the use of good software.

Bear in mind, however, that in today's environment such studies would probably be conducted under the direction of the director of information systems who considers personal computers as a threat and who has a long standing successful track record to keep users at arm's length.

Recall that in the 1960's the directors of EDP were successful in lowering a punched card curtain between the user and the computer. Advocates of timesharing had a long and arduous battle to penetrate this barrier. It was alleged that users would never be able to type nor use a keyboard device. The derision for BASIC is remembered today by only a few. I recall putting terminals in an office with windows along a busy corridor and passersby asking what managers were doing with teletype machines.

Today forward-looking information systems executives recognize that *knowledgeable* users are coming and must be reckoned with. Robert J. Jirout, a past President of the Society for Management Information Systems (SMIS), commented on the subject in an interview published in the September issue of the Members Forum of SMIS. "...the user is going to end up doing more things for himself." Then Jirout says that "...ten years ago the user couldn't do things for himself..." and *had* to go to data processing. But today "every young kid coming out of college seems to know how to program" and will try to "get himself a personal computer." And now comes the punch line: "I think we ought to stop fighting the users who can do things for themselves."

Note here the "ought." A former president of SMIS *urges* members to stop fighting because the fight is ongoing. As an aside, recall that the Executive Council of SMIS recommended changing the name of the Society as one alternative to "Society for Information Executives" (*Members Forum*, September 1981, page 1). Thus we can take Mr. Jirout's statement as an authoritative assertion about the executives in charge of information systems. But what does SMIS do about this issue?

In a prospectus of September, 1981, SMIS funded a research program for the "Critical Information Systems issues of the 1980's." There are seven issues listed with forty-six subissues, but in the seven page document the name *personal computer* does not appear.

Now to the third prong of the organizational strategy of Hackathorn and Keen. They advocate correctly that "good 'end user' software packages should be disseminated throughout the organization." The specific example they provide is the VisiCalc package from Personal Software, Inc. However, I suspect it will be difficult to find an information systems executive to work hard to implement such a recommendation.

But do not despair. Support for personal computers is coming from another source — from good old-fashioned business interests.

When IBM noticed that many managers "smuggled in" Apple computers, they were concerned, realizing that their sales were threatened. Thus IBM introduced their Personal Computer. Software packages like VisiCalc or the Magic Wand of Peach Tree Inc. were not introduced by directors of Management Informa-

tion Systems, but by software houses with a commercial interest in developing friendly software packages. The substantial profit-making potential of personal computers and friendly software packages assures the penetration of this technology into the managerial world and to the support of DSS. But DSS people must find a way to finance personal computers and enlist the help of business executives who do not have a vested interest in main frames.

The challenge of DSS is to provide direct assistance and evidence to managers on the benefits of using personal computers in DSS. We need *practitioners* who can describe their successes in an easily understandable way. We need *researchers* who can find better and more effective ways to use personal computers. We need *educators* who can teach personal computers not as a toy but as a powerful technology for DSS.

At this juncture what we urgently need is not systematic control, cost benefit analysis, bureaucracy, and so on. We need innovation, self-reliance, and entrepreneurship.

All this is of course short range and pertinent to an unsettled environment. In a stable environment reason counts and the scholarly approach advocated by Hackathorn and Keen will prevail.

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