Guest editorial

by the Chairman of The Society of Indexers

'Beware—computer at work'

Newspaper headlines are intended to catch the eye, yet even in the quality press they not infrequently do so at the expense of stimulating emotional prejudice before the reader has embarked upon the article which follows. The above title led some readers of The Times to construe a highly informative feature as an indictment of computers at work (i.e. in operation). In fact, it was an analysis of the somewhat widespread disillusionment amongst firms—in the USA only—who have spent heavily on computers, only to discover that they are neither labour-saving nor cost-effective. Quite simply, the computers have failed to fulfil the claims made for them by their manufacturers and salesmen; so much so, that hundreds of firms have found it necessary to discontinue use of their computers and return to their pre-computer procedures, suffering in consequence massive frustration, disorganization, and financial loss. Court actions against computer suppliers, involving claims for loss and damages amounting to millions of dollars, are now apparently becoming a feature of the American way of life.

This is an interesting commentary on the unscrupulous marketing practices of some American computer manufacturers; even more on the scarcely credible gullibility, ignorance, downright incompetence of the customers who are ‘taken to the cleaners’ by them. In this country, we have lots of experience of similar goings-on in such markets as carbon paper, encyclopedias, double-glazing, Council housing, and so on.

From such articles as this, as from all the other cautionary tales, we can learn a great deal about people: the naughty ‘cowboys’ in the world of selling, their naive victims who bring disaster upon themselves and then scream for revenge—or at least compensation—for the results of their own folly. But we learn little or nothing about commodities. The rackets which led so many firms into the purchase of ‘mountains’ of carbon paper have never, to the best of my knowledge, given rise to any legitimate complaints about the quality of the carbon paper.

So with computers. The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our computers but in ourselves. It is we (human beings) who design them, program them, sell them, buy them, use them, misuse them, understand—or fail to understand—which of them is/are and which isn’t/aren’t appropriate to our particular requirements. Like the car-owner who knows virtually nothing about the complex artefact which he/she uses as a travelling chair, there is a type of computer-owner who thinks it possible to enjoy the benefits of a computer without knowing anything about the artefact except how to ‘drive’ it. Unlike the car-owner, who with luck can remain totally ignorant without loss or benefit, the prospective computer-owner must have a thorough prior knowledge BOTH of his own requirements AND of how to assess any computer’s capacity to fulfil those requirements.

That is why the SI has a Technology Working Party. Unlike American ‘small businessmen’, we are not ‘so bemused by the mystique . . .’ as to fall into the trap which has led so many of them to resort to litigation. Our members will be protected both against ‘cowboy’ salesmen and against being made redundant by the swift advances of technology.

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