

Editorial

Information management in business

Having recently completed an article describing a personal information system which I use, I realised that my early interest in its technology had evaporated to be replaced by an interest in its management, and this is what the article was about.

To obtain the best possible performance, a great deal of time must be spent on it, mainly on inputting and indexing – a chore and an expensive overhead. To reduce it, the system can be organised so that it provides a just adequate retrieval performance. The less onerous the task the more likely is it that incoming material becomes accessible information instead of remaining as potential information within a heap of papers steadily increasing in height.

Presumably in a large business, the same principles apply. The IT needs to be right, and having got it right, Information Management should rule. But compared with the amount of published material about IT and IT management, very little is published about the management of information per se. What there is, is published by information managers in a few journals – for instance *Information Services & Use*. The users themselves don't publish, but IT – merely a means to an end, a tool, is heavily promoted.

I seem to be in quite good company with this notion. Rear-Admiral (Retired) Grace Hopper said in a *Byte* (May 1991) interview: “We've spent almost half a decade talking about the process, the system, and the training. We've forgotten to look at the data or at the information we are processing”.

The impression I get is that IT is often treated as an end in itself. David Dantzig of Booz Allen & Hamilton says “The great promise of Information Systems makes managers feel compelled to do *something*” but it often seems to be the wrong thing. Many large organizations are disenchanted with their IT – it may come to appointing someone at board level to sort it out, sometimes unsuccessfully. One observer of the US scene said “I hear that nearly one third of the top IT men were demoted or fired last year”. In short, IT is often in a mess.

There have been some voices saying that much more attention should be given to information per se. John Framel, ex-director of information resources at Gulf Oil, advises managing a wide range of information functions – Data Processing, Telecoms, Office Systems, Libraries, etc., – as assets, not expenses.

This seems to echo Woody Horton's *Infomap* ideas. He suggests that "most work activities within an enterprise are, at best, only supported by computer and telecommunications ... information mapping helps to integrate information resources (not just the IT) that are isolated, splintered, and compartmentalized all over the corporate landscape".

These ideas seem to make some sense but they do not appear to be widely adopted.

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