

Editorial

Many years ago I read a book called *The Waste Makers* written by an American, Vance Packard. That book scared me. It made me realise for the first time that modern civilisation was wasting its natural resources and using them up at an alarming rate. Unfortunately, Packard's book was a nine-days' wonder and little was heard or said about our dwindling reserves of raw materials. That is, until the oil crisis hit the world in the early 1970s. Only then did people begin to sit up and take notice and start making plans to conserve energy and other resources. Since then it has become a fashionable pastime not only to conserve energy but also to find alternative sources, such as solar and wave power, to eke out our high-priced fossil fuels.

For my part—I hate waste; I hate duplication even more, particularly when I am involved in some of that duplication, however unwittingly. For example, it was common practice at one of the companies which had the misfortune to employ me, for senior managers to commission the same job from three different persons within the organisation—the premise being that if three individuals all come up with the same answer it must be right! What those senior managers did not realise was that the persons involved latched on to this technique very quickly and, consequently, they got together immediately and ensured that all their results matched! The company would sometimes then employ an external consultant—just to be sure! It is the duplication of effort, of manpower, and of design, research and development that annoys me the most. Can you, for example, tell the difference between a Ford Fiesta, a Volkswagen Golf (Rabbit), a Talbot Horizon, and a baby Peugeot? Those cars are so similar in design and concept that it is very difficult to tell them apart. The pundits will argue with me that we must allow free competition in a democratic world. I do not disagree with that, but there must be limits to which they do compete, and rationalisation must become the name of the game in future years. Perhaps the most costly area of duplication is research and development. It is also the most difficult area in which to identify that duplication. During my long career as an information scientist, I was constantly amazed at the amount of money that was wasted by scientists who neglected to follow the fundamental rule of checking before proceeding. A visit to the information department to ascertain what had been published in the technical press and what patents had been filed could have saved a lot of companies a lot of money.

Today there is no excuse. Modern technology has made it much easier for scientists, technologists and engineers to be kept fully informed of all external developments within their spheres of interest. That does, of course, exclude those areas which are subject to patent filing, where secrecy is essential. The use of

online bibliographical search facilities is now the norm rather than the exception; similar in-house data banks of internally generated information are becoming more commonplace as the technology to provide cheap and simple access is developed. In many cases the users are now very much aware of what can be done for them and are becoming more demanding with their requirements. More and more technical staff are undertaking their own searches and the technology is now there to simplify such facilities for them. The concept of a VDU on every desk is no longer fanciful thinking, but a fact.

Information is becoming a major growth area as more and more senior managers realise the serious limitations and consequent high cost of not being fully informed. The danger for the information profession is looming at an ever increasing rate over the horizon; that fact is that other people are now realising the potential for those who can—and will—supply the right information at the right time. The old-fashioned information officer is heading for the same fate as the Dodo—extinction! He has to identify the new trends, become acquainted with the new technology, and be one step ahead of the opposition: he must react, fast! Den Lewis, the new director of ASLIB, has been preaching this gospel for some years, and anyone who is not yet convinced should read his papers 'Doomsday Scenario' and 'Doomsday Scenario 2'. More and more people are beginning to realise that information—good information, timely information, and comprehensive information—is essential to maintain their position in a highly competitive world.

INFORMATION IS LIFE!

John Whitehead