

Editorial

Why is our wonderful technology so slowly accepted by organisations? Firstly, of course, people show a resistance to change. In principle, all of us are trying to conserve what we consider to be attainments of the past. Deep in our own being we are very conservative.

Secondly, we are afraid. Afraid of new things, since they force us to adapt, learn, fail, learn again. And all of us are afraid to fail....

Thirdly, we do not understand all those miracles of the future. They are not very user-friendly and, therefore, force us to engage in a learning process for which we do not have time enough, we feel. So, it would be nice to have an intermediary between the miracle and ourselves who understands both. An intermediary like, for example, the searcher who has a feeling for our information needs and can handle the complex online information system. That intermediary then is the interface between the system and us.

However ... office automation experts are saying that intermediaries, human interfaces, have no future. We will not need a postman, since we will have electronic mail. We will not employ telex operators, since we have got teletex on our word processors or personal computers. So, interfaces are a relic of the past.

If that is true, why is there such a proliferation of interfaces? First, on the technical level, you need an interface between terminal and network, called modem; one between computer A and computer B, called conversion software; one between software A and software B, called reformatting ... etc. What is the principal difference between these and the traditional role of the information intermediary? Both of them are a means of providing understanding between two parties, either humans or machines.

Secondly, there is a proliferation of interfaces on an organisational level. In nearly all the structures I try to live in, interfaces blossom: between government and citizen (unions, action groups, pressure groups); between expert and layman (consider the role of social workers to help people in distress); even to the level of industrial organisations where you need application units to bring the results of R&D to marketing people.

Interfaces galore!

In the online field, my good old friend Den Lewis, now Director of ASLIB, has built up a reputation as Doomsday Den, since he predicted that, in the year 2000, online intermediaries will be extinct. I tended to agree with him: we will not need some of the traditional intermediaries. But, now, I'm in doubt: what about the new, intermediary interfaces?

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