Lost in Translation:

“Total Systems” from War Room to Boardroom

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The Closed World

- Cultural history of the SAGE air defense system and the SDI project


The Corporate War Room...

- “the war-room atmosphere is growing up fast” (The Corporate Command Post, 1968)

“one by one, the same applications that are pioneered and proven in military use ultimately find their way into business” (1968)
“a more relaxed, leisurely management environment. The uneasiness will be replaced by a feeling of confidence in the completeness and timeliness of information and in the decisions based on that information....”

Great dreams...

If he manages through systems, the boss will have time for leadership.
... but limited respect
MIS Will Realize Potential of computer...

ADP – THE STILL-SLEEPING GIANT

By John Diebold

Automatic data processing (ADP) has certainly arrived. But somehow it has not produced changes of the order of magnitude that we who have pioneered in the field expected. Why is this? And what major changes in management still lie ahead as the revolution in information technology gathers momentum?

Speedy and Spotty

Let’s take a quick look at the record since ENIAC and Mark I made their appearance 15 years ago. Is that brief period five distinct phases or may be discerned:

1. First, there was the cold war of potential users in the early 1950s. Typical of this period is the memorandum that quoted a Pope’s “be not the first by whom the new is tried, nor yet the last to lay the old aside.” Experience was from Missouri and had to be shown.

2. Next came the status “back” of 1956-1957 when corporate presidents decided they had to keep up with the Joneses. Four-color photos of walnut panelled, deep-carpeted “showcase” installations graced corporate annual reports, and yet enumerating savings by computers were what the president bragged about to one another out on the golf course.

3. Then, with the onset of the 1957 recession, came disillusion at the installation to live up to expectations. Notes early projections of big payoffs changed in a matter of months to an attitude reminiscent of Damon Runyon’s character, Harvey the Horse, on his way to the track: “I hope I break even today — I need the money.”

4. The fourth era was ushered in during the early 1960s. It was characterized by a growing sophistication on the part of business regarding at least the obvious data-processing applications (more programs and other trained personnel becomes available). Of special importance, there was a growing appreciation by computer manufacturers of business data-processing problems, which affected computer design.

5. Finally, today, we have routine acceptance of the electronic computer as an ever-growing tool of business. Almost 15,000 computer systems are now installed in this country alone. And, if even greater significance, more computers are now on order than have been built in the past 15 years.

Unrealized Potential

Of course, many of the 15,000 ADP systems in use are more than paying their way, and some are performing tasks that were not possible before. But even in the best applications we have not come close to realizing the computer’s true potential. Let me hazard some reasons why.

Deterring factors differ from installation to installation. Sometimes — but rarely now — the equipment is at fault. In most cases the problem can be laid right on management’s doorstep:

* Inadequate planning, mostly panoplied rather than corporate-wide in scope.
* Not enough fresh thinking, and too much reliance on canned approaches.
* Selection of the wrong people to plan the installation — i.e., technical specialists who fail to acknowledge or even appreciate their limited understanding of business practice.
* Overemphasis on hardware and underemphasis on the design of comprehensive systems.

These are serious faults. But the basic problem lies deeper. It is far more subtle, yet in a

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