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The software revolution

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Walking with computers

When I think about computers and programs I mostly think about the story, said to be true, but perhaps an urban myth, concerning the helpline for a multinational computer company.

Without repeating the entire lengthy story, it has a consumer calling the help line and advising that the screen was blank and the newly purchased computer did not work, and continues through the initially patient and then increasingly frustrated questions from the helper and more inane answers from the consumer, until the helper establishes that the consumer hasn't plugged the computer into the power point.

The helper then asks whether the consumer has kept the box the computer was delivered in.

When the consumer says yes, the advice the helper then gave was for the computer to be packed into the box and returned to the store the consumer bought it at.

The consumer asks what he should advise the staff there, and the helper says he should say he is bringing it back because he is too stupid to own a computer.

The myth goes on to say the helper was sacked, but I would have liked to have represented the helper in an unfair dismissal action!

I suppose that all of us have faced the problems brought about by the technological revolution. I suspect that some even faced the onslaught of the electric typewriter, then the word processor and then the computer.

That, of course, is only half the problem, the other half being the software that goes with it.

First there was DOS, well actually that's wrong. First, or thereabouts, there was something called FORTRAN.

I remember going on a field trip in third year high school to a room filled with a single computer at the South Australian Institute of Technology.

At this stage we were using slide rules and logarithms in maths at school.

Handheld calculators hadn't made their appearance at this stage and had yet to go through their stage of illegality in maths exams.

What we had to do was to fill in some empty boxes on the card, much like the way in which you fill in a TAB betting form, to tell the computer to perform a simple arithmetic calculation, like $2 \times 2 = 4$.

With much trepidation, the card was handed to the maths teacher who in turn handed to the technician, who in turn fed into the machine.

I can't now remember what was actually printed out at the end but I think there was something on the form which resembled some sort of gobbledygook, largely because I had failed to fill form in properly. It was then I knew I qualified as suitable for law.

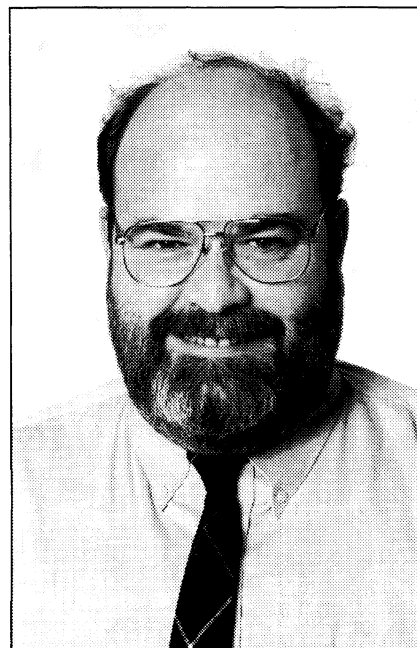
The advent of computers seems to have developed from funny looking little machines fed by plastic records to rather larger ones that require their own room.

In about 1985, when I was with (then) Mildren Silvester, there was much ado about the installation of a stand-alone computer to house the accounts package.

It required the establishment of a separate room with its own air-conditioning system that had to be at a temperature of about 21 degrees celsius.

I had been planning to store my wine in the room: I considered that was its primary benefit, until I discovered the delights of the two games which were included on the computer system.

I can't claim finding them as that honour belongs to Bill Parish.



Ian Morris, president

One of the two games was a game called Zork, which told you:

You are north of a house.

What you then had to do was to enter into the computer the direction "South" in which case, sometimes, the computer then flashed up on the screen the words:

You are near a gate that is north of a house.

All you could tell the computer was a direction such as a compass direction or up or down.

There were no pictures, and certainly no video scenes.

What the game would do, it seemed to me (but this may be because I didn't play it all that well), was to leave you in a position where none of the normal commands worked and when, totally frustrated, you typed in "go back" the computer would say:

He who walks with his hands on the plough and looks backwards is not fit to be in the Kingdom of winners.

As soon as it did that, the computer would freeze and the whole system would crash. That could be embarrassing if you tried to play the game during business hours!

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*walking with computers,
from previous page*

The advent of computers also spelt the demise of the high priestesses of the office, the computer operator typists who until then were the only people who knew how to handle the word processing system.

Since then the advent of Macintosh Apple and IBM Windows operating systems has been to mean that even troglodytes like myself are able to use computers.

I'm not sure, though, that most of us are not operating computers in the same way that we would like to have operated typewriters. I guess that some others may have now sort of conquered Word for Windows and are able to do their own letters from time to time but I think that that, together with the operation of e-mail is about as high as most of our competencies go.

The development of competency in the management of computer systems has not matched the tremendous increases in the capability of the computer systems themselves.

The legal profession now finds itself at the beginning of a very steep (and no doubt expensive) climb that will require a degree of competency in the application of computer software technology that does not now exist generally in the profession.

I would expect that shortly the courts will allow the electronic filing of documentation and that standard orders for discovery in the future will require that the documents described in the list of documents to be scanned onto a computer system and then "burnt" onto a CD.

I know that this practice does occur in some of the more complex commercial cases that have been run on the eastern seaboard, and a

couple of times in the NT, but I fully expect that the practice will become far more widespread and eventually obligatory.

I suppose that the same technology will apply to appeal books and transcripts.

Some firms have already embraced the technology required to run complex data systems that enable the easy storage of documentation and are a step on the pathway to the completely electronic office. The rest of us will have to follow.

In our cover story this month about the "software revolution" Professor Michael Vitale states: "...there is no reason whatsoever for organisations to become good at writing

administrative software, and there is no reason for them to tolerate badly written systems".

It's wise advice.

I suppose to prove that all of us can take to technology like a catfish to water, this article was (mostly) dictated directly onto the laptop.

These programs are quite good now, but the trap is that they don't make spelling mistakes, they just use the wrong word!

Consequently some careful proof reading is required, which I suppose is no bad thing.

My secretary says that she can type more accurately than I can talk and for once she might be write. ①

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