

Book Review

The Information Edge by N. Dean Meyer and Mary E. Boone. Published by McGraw-Hill, New York, 1987. ISBN 0070417282. £22.95. 352pp.

This book is in the tradition of *In Search of Excellence*. It is from the charismatic school of management, rather than the analytic school; it proselytizes a case for IT, rather than pleads a closely argued case. It does not go so far in denying analysis in favour of experimentation; instead it leaves the analysis until after the event.

After a fairly brief review of some relevant theory, a series of cases are described which show the wonders of IT and how much its use improved the performance of particular organizations. The cases range from electronic mail used in the Ministry of Defence to organize equipment for the Falklands Task Force, to the use of cybernetics in economic planning in Allende's Chile, and from voice mail for salesmen to spreadsheets for loss adjusters. It would be difficult not to find an example which applies to a reader's organization. (The UK examples draw on Meyer's consultancy work for CCTA.)

In each case the organizational benefits are identified in terms of an improvement in performance which is then converted to 'value added' in the form of a retrospective calculation. The benefits are calculated somewhat arbitrarily, but conservatively. Return on investment goes up to several thousand per cent.

Despite using the value added approach, the work of Paul Strassmann (*The Information Payoff*, Free Press, New York, 1985) is quickly dealt with. Apparently his results are too ambiguous and his analysis too complex for use in everyday businesses. Strassmann's approach is, as yet, too little accepted. Meyer and Boone are looking to overwhelm the opposition to IT and not to counter it; it is the 'Walls of Jericho' approach.

Irritatingly, it is claimed that this book is about

office automation when it is not. At times the authors are forced into painful efforts to explain why some IT systems are really office automation (OA), merely because they are not used by IT experts. They include in this DEC's XCON, the world-famous expert system for configuring VAX minicomputers.

The authors claim OA is not involved in interpersonal skills when, all too obviously, it is. OA may not help managers to express themselves more clearly or to convey their messages more accurately, but it does change the methods they use. Conveying appropriate emotions in electronic mail is very difficult.

The final part of the book is intended to help would-be implementers find applications and evaluate them. Find a volunteer with a high pay-off application which is also high-profile. Do not look across the whole scope of the organization; instead identify those functions central to its profitability and survival. This is diametrically opposed to the view of not automating something done only by a few people some of the time. Pick applications in organizationally powerful departments or functions. If the user or department is important it will add political weight to the subjective parts of the value added calculation. This is put most crudely (and effectively) as 'What does it take to get the user promoted?' If this sounds like Niccolò Machiavelli then it ought to, for the message is the same.

The focus of this book is on the competitive and strategic use of IT and the cases provided exemplify this. As such it provides useful material for those who have to justify IT in their organizations or who teach about it. If you cannot win on conventional cost benefit analysis then reform the system. Do not look for cost displacement; instead go for value added backed by political 'muscle'.

Ewan Sutherland