Management Information Systems.

T. W. McRae (Editor).

Penguin Modern Management Readings, London, 1971. 381 *pp.* £0·60.

Management information systems is an awkward subject to write about because it stretches all the way from the personal interactions of human managers to advanced applications of computer science. This book attempts to span most of that field with a selection of published papers and a commentary. An extract from Katz and Kahn's book *The Social Psychology of Organizations*, appears near the beginning and near the end there is a Datamation article by Knight on the cost performance of computer hardware. The ambition is excellent and many of the articles are well written and useful. There is enough material here on different aspects of the subject to make the book a very good buy at the price.

Nevertheless, as an introductory textbook it has serious weaknesses, particularly for O.R. practitioners or the more analytical students of business. For example, the section on evaluating M.I.S., besides being half as long again as any other section, is devoted almost entirely to the computer, rather than to the Information System. This may be an accurate reflection of recent concern over computer economics, but ought not to be representative of the true balance of interest in the longer term. Again, the section on design has no report of the experience of any one organization in this area. Dearden's paper on "How to Organize Information Systems", though valuable, is not a substitute, as practice here has a habit of diverging from the theories of academics and the exhortations of consultants. It is also surprising that Mumford's paper on planning computer systems for the people that use them appears under "Other Aspects", instead of in this section where it appears to fit at least as well as the McKinsey report of 1968.

Under the heading of "Real Time" it is a pity that no distinction is made between systems with immediate *recording* of the state of the world they model, and systems with immediate *response* to a management question or command. This may be because the hardware involved is frequently rather similar, but in information systems, the difference is vital.

Overall, the book is patchy. Some excellent articles are interspersed with others that verge on platitude. It is easy to criticize individual sections both for what they include and what they leave out. (Why, for example, is the only "practical experience" article in the "Real Time" section one that was written *before* the system worked?) All the same, this is a better-balanced book than many others on the subject. It contributes to the emergence of a structure in the field of M.I.S. that can be recognized and used as a basis for study.

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