USER GROUP MEETINGS

Three computer users group committees were formed: Data General Corp., Digital Equipment Corp. (DEC) PDP/8 and PDP/12 series, and DEC PDP/11. A fourth group is being formed incorporating users of machines other than the above.

Chairmen of the Committees are: John King, Department of Psychology, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois 61761 (Data General Group); Doris Aaronson, Dept. of Psychology, 4 Washington Place, Room 858, New York University, New York, New York 10003 (PDP/8 and PDP/12); and Don Kearns, Director of Computing Center, Oregon Research Institute, Box 3196, Eugene, Oregon 97403 (PDP/11).

Report on User Group Meetings at the Fourth National Conference on the Use of On-Line Computers in Psychology

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Below is a report on Computer-User Group Meetings held at the Fourth Annual Meeting of the National Conference on the Use of On-Line Computers in Psychology, November 20, 1974, Boston, Massachusetts. In the meetings reported here, much of the discussion centered around problems with laboratory minicomputers and their manufacturers, with hardware, software, and service, and with possible solutions to those problems. A good deal of the discussion concerned the Digital Equipment Corporation, probably because more than half of the small computers in psychology labs are made by that company. It should be noted that psychologists present felt that these problems were not unique to DEC and that DEC was probably doing better than other computer companies on meeting our research equipment needs. There was uniform agreement that much was lacking on the part of most manufacturers in providing us with high-quality computer service in several directions. Below is a summary of the particular complaints raised by computer users in the audience. Following that are ways to deal with those complaints that have been relatively successful in the past for some of the users present. In particular, many users suggested forming a more active national user-group of behavioral scientists so that we can help each other, and so that we can more effectively put pressure on the computer companies to make improvements. As a beginning in this direction, a two-page questionnaire was developed to provide

information for computer users and manufacturers regarding our applications and needs. The questionnaire follows this report. It would be helpful if readers who use mini-computers in their research could fill out that questionnaire and return it to us as soon as possible.

COMPUTER PROBLEMS IN BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH LABORATORIES

(I) Hardware

(1) It is difficult to obtain accurate up-to-date information from sales engineers on available components and on prices.

(2) Delivery of computer systems and of parts is slow, and often not within the delivery period promised by the manufacturer.

(3) Quality control leaves something to be desired. Too often, hardware does not function properly for a long time after delivery is made.

(II) Software

(1) There is poor communication among the manufacturers' technical people, resulting in program documentation with omissions and errors.

(2) It is difficult to get quick and accurate advice when systems programs do not function properly on the purchased hardware.

(3) The manufacturers' systems programming is not as sensitive to user needs in behavioral and biological sciences as might be desired.

(III) Service

(1) Servicemen generally appear reasonably soon after trouble is reported, but long delays occur in getting the repairs made for reasons listed below.

(2) Parts needed for repair are not adequately stocked at local offices, and delivery from stock at other locations is slow, or the wrong parts are delivered.

(3) Service engineers are often poorly trained. Frequently, they are trained on the job with the user paying for the engineer's mistakes and slowness.

POSSIBLE USER RESPONSES TO DEAL WITH COMPUTER PROBLEMS

(1) Persistently and aggressively demand better performance from local sales and service engineers. Perhaps people who talk louder get served better.

(2) Notify top management of the company about problems. Lost sales and bad service cost the company money. Top management wants to reduce these types of costs, while local offices may want to cover up such defects.

(3) Use your institutional legal staff when difficulties involve hardware, software, or service problems that conflict with the manufacturers' literature or contracts in letter or in spirit.

(4) Form user groups within your institution, city, region, or academic discipline to provide a larger economic unit to negotiate about improvements. It was suggested that the Conference members constitute such a group on a more long-range basis, and use the journal *Behavior Research Methods & Instrumentation* to aid in communication. Some doubts were expressed about our ability as an economic power. The total lab use of computer products may be small in relation to customers in the

business world. But computer companies may be sensitive to the public relations implications of such a dissatisfied group of users.

(5) User groups can facilitate communication among members regarding solutions to the above problems that had previously been successful for other labs.

(6) We can buy our hardware additions from other manufacturers and from used computer companies. There were some positive reports from users on these options. Several companies make compatible core memory at half the price for many major computers, and these products appear to work well so far. Several companies are making compatible peripherals for the major computers (loaders, tape drives, disks, printers, visual displays). Fewer users have purchased these products, so there is still too little information on this alternative. Reports are more positive than negative on Americal Used Computer Corp. and on Newman Computer Exchange that sell used systems and components of many major computer firms.

(7) A DEC representative was present at our meeting. He said that DEC was concerned about the problems of DEC users in psychology and about the lack of adequate communication between users and DEC. As an attempt on DEC's part to reduce our computer problems, DEC has recently formed a "Life Sciences Group." The DEC representative introduced himself as Mr. Steve Mullen and said his academic training was in psychology. He requested that we call him through the Maynard plant and ask for Marlboro Extension 6943. He will try to help solve our problems with DEC. Also, a representative from Data General Corp. was present, who wanted to improve communications between his company and NOVA users in psychology labs.

PART TWO: Fill in each box or blank that applies to you and your mini-computers with a numerical rating (1=good, 2=tolerable, 3=poor) and the initials of the computer company concerned (e.g. 2-DEC; 1-CDC).
 YOUR NAME _____ May we include your name in a laboratory-computer users group? Yes _____ No _____

VI. SALES INFORMATION (availability, clarity, accuracy)

Price Lists	Specifications	Delivery Details	Prerequisite Components	Applications Advice	VII. DELIVERY & INSTALLATION			
					Promised Del. Time	Actual Del. Time	Time to run ok	Quality Control
Computer Systems								
Peripheral Devices								
Modules, Parts, etc.								
Manufacturers Software								

Comments: _____

VIII. ON-GOING USE OF COMPUTER SYSTEMS

QUALITY: does what it should	BREAKDOWN & debugging rate	DOCUMENTATION clarity, accuracy	ADVICE & HELP in using the system
Computer Hardware			
Manufact. Software			

Comments: _____

IX. SERVICE ON HARDWARE PROVIDED BY COMPUTER COMPANIES

1. Information about service calls is reported to the engineer _____
2. Delay before the engineer arrives _____
3. The engineer arrives with needed tools and parts _____
4. Delays in obtaining needed parts for repair _____
5. Delay between engineer's arrival & when repairs are completed _____
6. The engineer's knowledge of your system _____
7. The engineer's ability at trouble-shooting _____
8. Communication between the engineer & the user _____
9. Communication between the engineer & his company _____
10. Preventive maintenance: frequency & quality _____
11. Other (specify) _____

Comments: _____