1980 DEC users' group report

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The 1980 meeting of users/owners of Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) computer equipment is discussed.

The formal part of the Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) users' session consisted of two papers describing innovative use of DEC equipment. These papers, in Session XII of this issue, were by Patricia A. Ferguson, Donald F. Miller, and P. Tobin Maginnis and by William L. Palya and Blake Brown.

The user-group part of the session started with a report of a survey of the user-group members on DEC's ability to meet our needs and expectations in running computer-based research laboratories. The details of this survey can also be found in Session XII of this issue. Briefly, on a 10-point rating scale (10 = best, 1 = worst), DEC scored about 6 on purchasing procedures and documentation, about 4 on delivery time and maintenance service, and about 7 on product satisfaction. The rating data were supplemented by individual users' reports on their interactions with DEC in each of these categories.

The meeting was attended by John Asahina from the St. Louis office of DEC. He responded with some hopeful comments on DEC's less than perfect record in our psychology laboratories. Asahina stated that many of the problems we have experienced stem from the fact that DEC's business is growing faster than DEC's facilities. However, DEC has recently instituted new training procedures for sales and service that should bear fruit during the next year, and they have made recent efforts to improve the readability and completeness of documentation. DEC is in the process of doubling their manufacturing facilities, and this should improve the delivery times we are now experiencing. To improve software support, DEC has recently instituted dial-up hot lines to put users in contact with experts on their particular systems. To facilitate purchasing decisions, DEC has published an "Applications Reference Catalogue."

Asahina gave a brief review of some of DEC's new products. These include smaller VAX computers that might come within the price range for some of our laboratories, color graphics, and a range of PDP-11/23-based MINC laboratory systems. On the software side, DEC has new programs for some of the VT-series displays, improved FOCAL for RT-11, and PASCAL, PL1, and "structured" FORTRAN for the VAX. Future directions will include the concept of a "software bus"

with single-command callable programs to help interface our laboratory applications.

Asahina's report was followed by an open discussion of users' computer problems. Some of the highlights follow:

Steve Poltrock: There is a problem with DEC's integrity; for example, they are providing service engineers who are not properly trained, we are promised delivery times that are far less than realistic estimates, and DEC is not providing adequate service for the older 12-bit machines. We don't trust DEC anymore.

Walter Schneider: You can get faster delivery of DEC equipment by buying from OEM vendors rather than directly from DEC.

Jerry Forshee: The sales quote is not definite until a "Magic DEC Number" is assigned—after DEC has had the PO [purchase order] 2 or 3 weeks. Ask the "Customer Service Officer" for that number and call the Maynard [Massachusetts] factory to get delivery information that your salesman doesn't know.

John Asahina: Some of the inaccurate delivery information is because of miscommunication between local and national offices and because of a nonoptimal computerized inventory system. Forshee's right about the "Magic DEC Number."

Gordon Pitz: DEC needs more systematic procedures to determine customer needs and to match them with appropriate hardware. We didn't know what we were buying until after we received the hardware. Other users have been sold hardware and software that were not appropriate for their applications.

John Asahina: Don't sit back and take bad information and service. Contact the regional and national offices if you are not satisfied with the local office.

Member X: There is not enough information on the free course credit allowances on DEC purchases, and the local salesmen don't give you that information.

John Asahina: The number of free course credits is acknowledged in two places: (1) on the order acknowledgement and (2) on the software product description.

Doris Aaronson: Are the small- and medium-sized PDP-11s going to see further growth in peripherals and software, or will they soon have the sales and service problems now facing the 12-bit machines?

John Asahina: DEC will continue to support these machines, but the real growth and development will be concentrated on the VAX series. Smaller and more affordable VAX machines will be available each year. DEC is now making their own chips, and in the future

we can expect VAX machines in the LSI-11/03 range.

Walter Schneider: What is the status of the 11/23 chips?

John Asahina: They are now off "hold" and should be more readily available. There had been production and quality control problems, so DEC held back on deliveries.

Doris Aaronson: Will you communicate our problems with the DEC national office in Maynard? Steven Mullen, who used to attend our meetings as the DEC representative for Life Science Applications, informed me that his office was abolished as part of DEC's customer relations program.

John Asahina: Yes. I intend to send a copy of your user-group survey report to them.

The user-group meeting was adjourned. If members of the National Conference on the Use of On-Line Computers in Psychology have specific ideas or requests for next year's user-group meetings (e.g., symposium topics, demonstrations, etc.), they should write to or call Doris Aaronson, New York University, Psychology Department, 6 Washington Place, New York, New York 10003 [(212) 598-7668].