

PSYCHOLOGIST'S VIEWPOINT REGARDING INFORMATION SERVICES

Henry M. Parsons, Consultant

I should like to put into this discussion of information services my 3 cents' worth as a human factors psychologist.

My first cent's worth refers to the null case. I had opportunity to query the data store through the on-line machine for any research on walking as a transportation mode. The printout came out with nothing. I predict that within a year, however, as a result of the energy deficit, there will be a fair amount of research in the store that will have treated walking in terms of modal choice.

My second cent's worth deals with a method for getting the word around. It is a method limited to locations where there are people who have produced some of the research and in fact are authors of some of the reports in the data store. Whoever is managing the facility should simply get a printout of some category that will include a report written by researcher X and send it to him or her in the house mail. On the basis of the eagerness authors display in circulating reprints of their publications, I predict they will tell all of their friends and ask them to tell their friends. Although this works best in certain locations, such as university departments (and I am not being entirely facetious), it is one way to get the word around.

My third cent's worth responds to the question, Should the querier operate the terminal or stand next to an operator who gets the material or request the material and get it later? To a psychologist like myself, this is an important point that concerns the effects of rapid feedback on behavior. It's a question of motivation. If you were in Las Vegas and had 5 silver dollars, you might have several options. You might give those 5 silver dollars to somebody to go play a slot machine and a few days later your delegate would come back to you and say, "I played the slot machine. You won a couple, and then you lost it all." The likelihood that you would give 5 silver dollars again to that person to go and play the slot machine would be very small. Suppose, on the other hand, you stood next to the slot machine and, because you had a lame arm and could not pull the lever yourself, you had a delegate do it. You gave 5 silver dollars to your delegate and watched the results. You won some, but eventually you lost it all. The chances are you would produce 5 more silver dollars, and this might go on for hours. I predict you would spend even more silver dollars if you got the immediate feedback from the slot machine by pulling the lever yourself. So, if you want people to use this on-line system, do try to have the person making the query either stand by so he or she will get quick feedback, or better yet, have the questioner actually operate the terminal.

From what I have said, you can see that, to a human factors psychologist, a terminal is not "peripheral" equipment in a computer system; it is "central" equipment.