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ENCOURAGING MATURE USER BEHAVIOR

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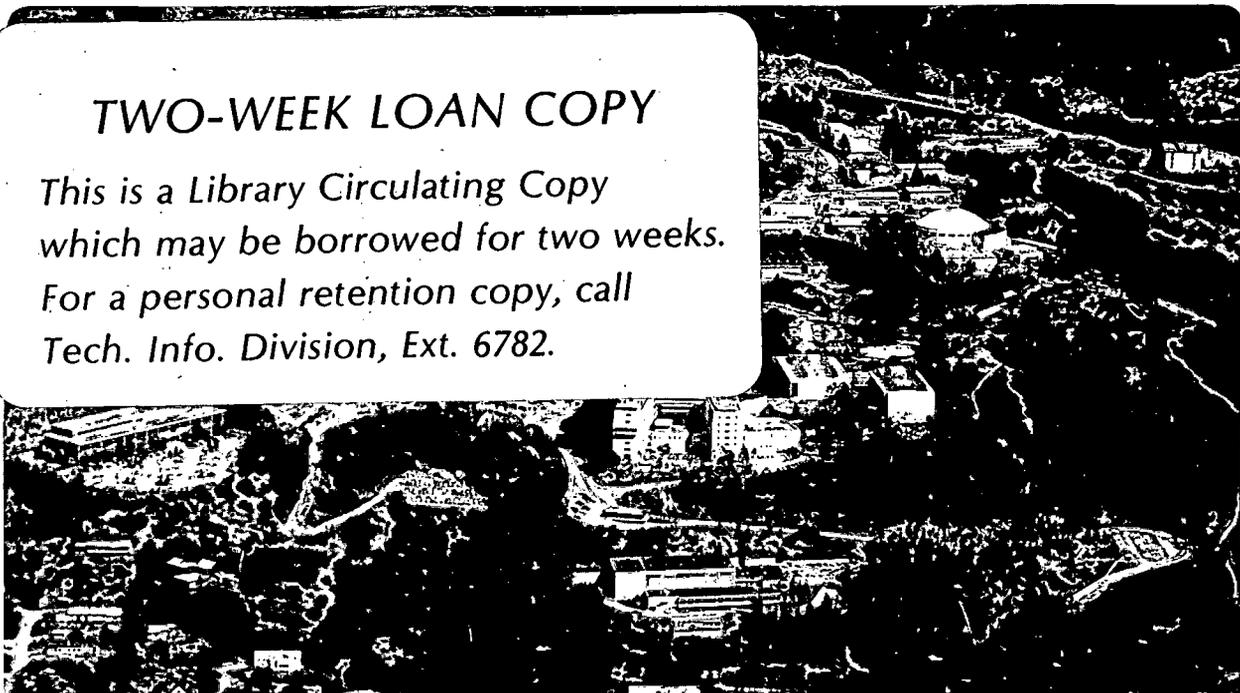
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Encouraging Mature User Behavior*

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Abstract: "Mature user behavior" is defined, and five specific DP Department policies which will encourage such behavior on the part of the users are considered.

Keywords and Phrases: maturity, mature user behavior, influencing user behavior, user responsibility, developing good user relations

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Introduction

The relationship between a DP department and its users often resembles a rockfight more than a cooperative attempt to solve real problems. As in a rockfight, there is a clear distinction between "us" and "them"; the combat begins in fun and somewhat ritualistically; it develops into quite an earnest and heartfelt struggle; it concludes with real wounds being inflicted. One way to avoid this painful outcome is to develop more mature behavior on the part of both the DP Department and the users. This note states some characteristics of mature user behavior and then proposes some policies and philosophies (which effectively define mature behavior on the part of the DP Department) that will encourage mature behavior on the part of the users.

Some Characteristics of Mature User Behavior

Mature use encompasses appropriate use, efficient use, and effective use. Since the earliest days of computing adequate attention has been given (in the literature if perhaps not in practice) to efficient use of computing hardware. More recently, effective use (again, of the hardware) has surged into equal prominence. But it remains rare to find an exhortation to

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effective or efficient use of the entire system: hardware, software, and the array of people, procedures, and policies which surrounds them. A mature user recognizes that inattention to any one of these aspects can cost him whatever advantage he has managed to pry out of the rest.

But even before reaching a point of concern with efficiency and effectiveness, the mature user strives for appropriate use of the system. He uses computers to complement people; he applies them first where they will be most productive; he uses the system as a tool to increase productivity, neither as a sophisticated toy nor as a source of personal power.

The mature user has high expectations of the system, and he works with the system providers to ensure that those expectations are fulfilled. One way in which he does this is to provide quick and accurate feedback when the system surprises him. Another way is to avoid springing surprises on the system. (He does not, for instance, double his demands overnight without advance warning.)

The mature user does not waste resources. (In these days of high environmental consciousness, exegesis upon this theme is unnecessary.)

The mature user does not abuse special privileges or loopholes.

Finally, the mature user knows the system thoroughly. He is aware of its potential for harm as well as for benefit. He accepts the consequences of his own actions.

DP Department Policies that Encourage Mature User Behavior

The most effective way for a DP Department to encourage maturity among the

users is to demonstrate maturity itself. Here are five specific policies which will help you to do that. Three of them (1, 2, and 4) should come as no surprise; the other two may be a bit more controversial:

1. communicate amply, truthfully, and in good time
2. eschew special privileges for yourselves
3. charge for services and structure the charging algorithm so as to reward maturity
4. listen and act
5. adopt the French Philosophy ("everything not explicitly forbidden is permitted").

Each of these aspects of DP Department maturity is discussed in more detail below.

On Communication

Despite the volumes which have been written about the importance of proper communication, lack of it remains one of our principal problems. In addition to the problems common to all organizations, DP Departments are afflicted with two specific barriers to good communication: a tendency towards excessive use of jargon, and a failure to distinguish propaganda from fact.

It is extremely difficult for those deeply involved in a dynamic and highly technical specialty to remember that real-world people do not share their technical vocabulary and are not entranced by their liberal use of acronymic cant. It is not that they cannot learn new terms (for many users have technical vocabularies of their own which are just as extensive and

esoteric as DP's), but that they should not have to. The principal justification of the computer is that it lightens humanity's load; much of that lightening is lost if it is accompanied by a heavy burden of new, complex, and unwieldy language. It is the responsibility of the DP Department to see that all of the information necessary for wise use of the system is published, in readable fashion, and in the users' terms. Secret languages are fun, but should have been given up along with your Captain Midnight Secret Decoder.

The other major DP-specific barrier to communication is a high level of distrust, inspired by a user-perception of years of half-truths and misrepresentations. I characterized this above as a failure to distinguish between propaganda and fact. This was perhaps a little harsh, for "propaganda" implies deliberate distortion, but DP Departments have been all too willing to pass the manufacturer's hyperbole on to the users, to characterize systems by their sales brochures instead of their results, to measure systems by abstract technical yardsticks instead of the users' perception of performance. They also suffer from the common human tendency to report only their successes. Here are six rules which, in time, will help you to regain the users' trust:

- do not withhold bad news
- do not mask political decisions with spurious technical excuses
- answer questions honestly and completely
- be willing to say "I don't know" (and then go and find out) instead of inventing an answer
- describe system performance in user-oriented terms
- do not claim that a system is "working" because it satisfies some

abstruse technical criterion if the users' work isn't getting done.

On Special Privilege for the DP Department

One reason for the lack of communication between the DP Department and the users is the fact that they see different systems. To some extent the difference is the greater familiarity enjoyed by the DP Department; this difference is unavoidable. More significant--and avoidable--are the differences which arise from special considerations which DP Departments all too often take (for themselves and) for granted. (One of the best ways to improve service is to see that the servers get the same service as everyone else.) It has already been noted that we expect mature users to not abuse loopholes and privileges. Such an expectation is unrealistic in the extreme if the DP Department itself is unwilling to abide by the same principle. The DP Department should avoid giving itself special classes of service, special prime dedicated time, better terminals, special ports, or any of the other tempting perquisites of proximity.

On Charging

Cogent arguments exist on both sides of the question of charging for computing services. We are here concerned with encouraging maturity on the part of the users. We can do that best by treating the system as something of value, and remembering that people tend to devalue goods and services that are given away. Thus even pro-forma charging tends to discourage frivolous use, so that usage will reflect need. It is useful to remember that, one way or another, it's the users' money that supports the DP operation. One sign of maturity is the ability to allocate ones resources--

including money--appropriately.

This is an appropriate place to mention the existence of effective currencies other than real money: funny money (or corporate scrip, which can be bartered for other corporate services) is the most obvious, but one can also use various forms of credit, priority service (including turnaround), or allocation units. Real money, the kind that can be spent on other services from other sources, tends to have one advantage over all the others, however: the DP Department tends to be more responsive if its income is dependent upon the quality of service it gives.

You would not have read this far if you did not think your users are at least somewhat immature. Presumably, then, you wish to change their behavior. Careful adjustment of a charging algorithm which involves real money is one of the most effective means I know for influencing behavior.

On Listening and Acting

(This is clearly related to communication, but merits consideration in its own right.)

It is not enough to speak to the users in their own language...you must also listen to them in their own language. You must provide them with a forum. You must publish their comments and your responses. Your responses should be helpful; if that is not possible, you should be sympathetically (rather than brutally) honest. And you must follow through.

There are several ways in which you can provide a forum for the users: through a newsletter (if you have one), via a "programmer assistance" service, via a liaison program, or through users' meetings. The most useful

mechanism(s) at any site will depend upon the personality of the site, the talents available, and the history of the relationship. The most obvious way is through users' meetings. Several kinds of users' meetings are possible, but they all should follow the same general pattern:

- If possible, hold the meeting on user or neutral turf, and have a user as host or convenor. This avoids the awkwardness that some folks feel when criticising a host in his own home. It makes the users feel more comfortable during the meeting.
- Ad hoc meetings should be held at the users' convenience; scheduled meetings should be held on schedule.
- It is useful to agree with the principal users in advance upon the major topics to be covered. Get specific questions in advance, if you can. Have answers to those questions prepared and verified for presentation at the meeting.
- Don't constrain the meeting too rigidly to a prescribed format; let it flow. Answer questions as they arise. (Some constraint may be necessary to get through all the pre-set material, but considerable leeway is recommended. You want feedback, so don't cut it off.)
- Bring the right people--those who can provide authoritative information in all expected areas of discussion--to the meeting.
- Do not defend. Listen and acknowledge. You may explain, if necessary, but it is important to avoid that hardening of the attitudes that accompanies defensive postures.
- Do not attack. (However tempted you are.)
- It is sometimes permissible to argue a question of fact; it is

never permissible to argue a matter of perception. Under no circumstance should you twist a question of perception into a trivial debate on fact.

- Be honest--especially when it hurts.
- Do not avoid embarrassing topics.
- Give immediate feedback via the Proceedings. Include all on-the-spot comments, questions, and responses as well as the prepared ones.
- Announce what will and will not be done, with reasons (if they do not appear in the dialogue)...and then do it!
- Remember your promises. (The users will, especially if you do not.)
- Pick the right kind of meeting for the purpose you have in mind. Among the kinds you might wish to consider are

- general: to which everyone is invited and at which any topic may be discussed. (The level of detail at general meetings tends to be not very deep.)
- topical: the topic might be a specific system or subsystem, or a particular class of users or problems. (The level of detail can vary from quite shallow--for an introductory tutorial--to quite deep.)
- departmental: in which items of interest to a particular organizational entity are addressed, sometimes in exhausting detail. (These meetings can have as much political as technical content.)
- uni-disciplinary: similar to the above, but without the political overtones; the unifying principal is problem

oriented rather than organization-oriented. Also similar to, but more general in scope than, a topical meeting.

As mentioned above, a users' meeting is not the only way in which you can provide a forum for the users. Another is a liaison program, which, in the current terminology, might qualify as a distributed users' meeting. Liaison in either direction is possible--users to DP Department or DPD to users--but the latter is more likely to continue to generate good information over the long run. (A user acting as liaison to the DP Department all too frequently becomes infected with various DP disorders and loses the user perspective.) A liaison program can be either informal or formal, but some level of formality is desirable to demonstrate the DP Department's commitment to the program. Without this commitment the program will soon atrophy.

A liaison program will stand or fall upon the selection of its agents: good ones are conversant with the users' jargon (one doesn't send an accountant to talk to the chemists), they are intelligently active listeners, and they are technically competent; it's no wonder they are very hard to find! A good liaison program is also regular but not burdensome, and is organized around corporate structure rather than DP Department structure.

Many installations have a "programmer assistance" service to which users may apply when they have trouble making the system behave as they would like. This service can provide a less-obvious forum than the two we have discussed so far. The consultants who operate such a service are well

situated to speak for the users on matters of convenience, confusion, rate of change, quality of service, etc. The fact that this form is relatively indirect should not cause it to be overlooked.

The last of the obvious ways to provide a forum for the users is to provide them with a way of getting input into the DP Department's newsletter (if it doesn't have one, it might consider creating one). This can be done either through accepting--even soliciting--articles by various users or via an agony column. This last is a mysterious thing, for many places which try it find it not to be self-sustaining. One of the secrets is to print all (non-obscene) submissions. Another seems to be to have all DP Department responses signed (the user entries are anonymous, of course). And, most important, the responses must contain material of substance...endless streams of "We'll think about it" are not very useful. A clear "No" backed up by a sound reason (with dialogue invited) is far preferable to constant temporizing. (An occasional clear "Yes" is even more attractive, of course....)

With all of these means of dialogue the important things are

- let the users be heard, especially when their message disagrees with the DP party line
- respond honestly and sympathetically
- when you say you'll do something, do it!

The French Philosophy

"The French Philosophy" is a permissive one. Its very foundation is an assumption of maturity, and it implies that the DP Department should make

few rules to restrict the commerce between users and consenting systems. The user is not protected from himself. He may take whatever foolish risks he desires. What rules exist, exist to protect the system itself from abuse, or one user from another. So long as his folly claims no innocent victims, the user is free to exercise it. Some particular aspects are:

- let the users write their own programs
- let the users run equipment
- let the users choose their own applications
- let the users exercise the full range of capabilities of the system
- let the users choose where and when to compute (!)

The French Philosophy is a good test of your commitment to the idea of user maturity: To the extent that you withhold these privileges you demonstrate your belief in the immaturity of your users. They will recognize that belief and act to justify it. To the extent that you grant these privileges you demonstrate your belief in the maturity of your users. They will recognize that belief and act to justify it. But before you can turn them loose, you must ensure that they are adequately prepared.

IF you have given your users the knowledge and tools they need

THEN you may hold them accountable for the consequences of their own actions

ELSE you are responsible for all disasters and deficiencies

Once they have accepted the notion of accountability your users are on the road to maturity. But that is not enough: Unless the DP Department, too, exhibits maturity it is useless to expect any continuing demonstration of

maturity among the users. This means that the DP Department, too, must accept responsibility for its own actions. Among the ways you can do this are

- establish and honor a sensible refund policy. The users should not foot the bill for your learning experiences.
- exhibit a sensible disregard for policy and procedure when it is clearly in the corporate interest to do so. One of the most familiar indications of immaturity is a bureaucratic refusal to bend the rules when appropriate.
- live by the users' rules. They have real work to do, too. If you can't survive in their world neither can they.

One final thing you can do for your users to help them on the way to maturity is to kick them out of the nest. Maturity is demonstrated by the ability to make sensible choices. It cannot be exercised in a choice-free environment. Make sure that choices are available; let your users exercise freedom of choice, even though one of the choices is independence of the DP Department. When they have the freedom to choose their own way and elect to stay with you as partners rather than as dependents then you will know that both you and they have achieved maturity.

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