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Letters to the Editor

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Letters to the Editor:

To the Editor:

Eden's interesting article in the April issue sent a shiver up my spine since it reminded me of an EDP (electronic data processing) consulting case where a contented client accepts the desired (optimal) solution but begins living not so happily ever after. The selected solution was decidedly the best of the five or six possibilities which were offered but it was also about twice as expensive as another possible solution, one which wasn't even on the list. Where was this ideal solution during the search phase? Why didn't the talented analysts and hardware-software experts see the possibility earlier? I think that it was too good to be true.

In seeking cost benefit tradeoffs we may confine our search to a higher general range on the assumption that we always have to pay more to get more. Granted, we may get a *lot* more in terms of something like computer hardware — Grosch's law, which still seems to work for computers that are medium-sized and above, predicts that we'll get back computer power as the square of the investment. Yet, in many EDP situations the hardware-software mix may result in a combination which has speed of light processors but tortoise-like software or vice versa. The analyst is often reluctant to look in the other region where for the same or lower total investment a better response might be obtained. This region

could be called the "Happy Hunting Ground" and seems to be especially prevalent in EDP-related cases.

There are probably other reasons for the phenomenon that do not have to do with the search phase. Not long ago I delivered a Management Information System (MIS) design which was, if I may say so, practically ideal. It was less expensive than the present system and delivered more responsive results: definitely in the Happy Hunting Ground. I was politely thanked and paid but not invited back. I had missed the important fact that a budget had been allocated to the system and my plan had only delayed them in getting the money spent. Also, to spend less and get more in the future, in fact, implicitly criticized the system that my clients had been using all along.

Another generic example can sometimes be found when new techniques for training are introduced. The choice can be between company-sponsored programs at elegant hotels in interesting cities and simple audio-visual or programmed instruction techniques where the materials, books, tapes, or videodisks, are used again and again. The use of in-house materials results in a total cost curve which rises once when the materials are first purchased and then stays flat (no increase in total cost) for a long range before rising again. The flat part looks like the seat of a chair on the graph. Such training pro-

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grams are far less expensive than more elegant techniques, often delivering remarkably better results too.

The insight is that not all total cost curves are by definition due northeast and management scientists need to look for occasional pleasant surprises where better results come from investing less, not more. My recent experiences indicate the need to look carefully for such options in the Happy Hunting Ground, perhaps to find, unbelievable (at first), seat-of-the-chair ones.

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To the Editor:

Nasrudin was crawling on his hands and knees in front of his house.

"What are you doing, Mullah?" asked a friend.

"Looking for my keys," replied Nasrudin.

"Where did you have them last?"

"In my house."

"Then why are you searching outside your house?"

"The light is better out here."

This Sufi fable illuminates an error that researchers are being encouraged to commit. For example, at the AIDS meeting last November, two influential scholars called for moratoria on certain "wooden issues" that have been "clogging up our journals." These issues included the empirical dimensionality of task design, comparisons of measurement instruments, expectancy theory, the mathematical form by which variables are

combined (shame on Isaac Newton!), and the moderating effects of self-esteem. One former editor admitted screening out nearly all articles dealing with task design.

The arguments for moratoria seemed to be based on personal preference or an intuition that some topics are less likely than others to yield new contributions. Metaphors such as "beating a dead horse," "low payoff," "spinning wheels," and "failure to bear fruit," abounded. But what of depth? What of persistence? What of the difficult search for the keys where the light is dim?

The blackballing of certain topics by an editor or reviewer tempts us to color our science with pragmatism. To be pragmatic, we should seek truth in the daylight of general approval rather than in solo obscurity. By choosing accepted topics, we can improve our chances of finding and publishing something acceptable. However, as long as journals reward this kind of pragmatism, who will be brave enough to endure the tedium and persecution of answering the difficult, unsexy, unpopular questions? Pragmatism in research can stifle the course of scientific discovery.

Breakthroughs often result from persistence in the face of ridicule and ostracism, after someone has reopened an answered question. "The earth is round? Baloney!" "The solar system is heliocentric? Not only preposterous, but heretic!" "Germs cause disease? Absurd!" "The continents are drifting? Impossible!" Persistence in research should not be discouraged.

Edison persisted in his search for a suit-

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able material for a light-bulb filament even though a thousand materials had failed. He encouraged his sponsor, Henry Ford, with a negative image of the findings. "We have discovered a thousand materials that will *not* work," he argued.

Research should never be censored on grounds that the light is better somewhere else.

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Call for Papers

Interfaces announces a CALL FOR PAPERS dealing with the forestry and forest products industry for a special issue. Particularly suitable are the results of *implemented* applications of management science in the following areas:

- (1) forest management
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- (3) harvesting
- (4) marketing
- (5) international forestry
- (6) application of microcomputers and MIS.

All manuscripts will be refereed, and should be received by September 1, 1983. Manuscripts may be submitted to either of the editors of this special issue.

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