

# POLICY AND THE INFORMATION CENTER'S ADOLESCENT YEARS

HENRY EDWARDS, CIBA-GEIGY

The Information Center concept was begun over six years ago by IBM in Canada. Since then, it has crossed the border and has established itself in almost every medium to large organization in the United States. Even though the Information Center (IC) is only six years old, many changes have taken place. When the IC was first conceived, the idea of a Personal Computer (PC) on everyone's desk was far fetched. Now there are professional journals and conferences designed solely for the IC users and managers.

In the early stages, there were many promises of reduced backlogs, happy users, worry free MIS managers, and so forth. There have been some major advantages to those companies that have successfully implemented the IC concept. Notice that I said "successfully implemented." There has been much written about how to ensure that your IC is a whopping success and meets all of those wonderful accolades that you promised your management.

The needs for those Information Centers reaching their adolescent age (between two and five years) are changing. Their needs are much the same as those of your teenage sons and daughters. This is a period of confusion, much growth, unabashed hunger, and increasing peer pressure. However, what they need the most is attention, lots of support in spirit and in dollars as well.

## RESEARCH STUDY

In preparation for this paper and presentation, I accumulated much information from reviewing current research. This research concerned changes in the policies and roles of not only the Information Center but, also within MIS/DP as well. To better understand the current concerns, I conducted a survey which consisted of a three page questionnaire sent to over one hundred and seventy organizations throughout the United States. Much interest in the survey was indicated with over eighty organizations responding. Only five organizations said that they did not have an Information Center.

## FINDINGS

One of the most interesting things I learned through this process is that no matter how simple you make a survey, the questions will be interpreted incorrectly or with the wrong intent. I intentionally designed the survey so that the respondent need only check the proper block. The amount of annotations I received was amazing. Now, how am I supposed to enter those special notes into the computer for analysis? Enough of that. Let's get to the good stuff.

## CURRENT CONCERNS

When asked, "What do you see as the most important concerns of your Information Center?", the top concerns were; 1) training and 2) the integration of different technologies, 3) staying abreast of technology, and 4) top management support. I found that the current concerns were different depending on how long the Information Center had been established. Those organizations with new Information Centers (one year or less) were more concerned with the issue of training than those companies whose IC's were well established. Organizations with mature IC's are more concerned with 1) the integration of technologies and 2) staying abreast of these technologies. This makes intuitive sense since training is a very big issue for the new IC when because training must be done not only on the Information Center but also on the concepts of computers as well.

When the concerns of the IC were analyzed against whether the IC was Personal Computer (PC) based or mainframe based, or both, I found that organizations with the PC based IC's were more concerned with training than were the mainframe based IC's. The mainframe based ICs' number one concern was the integration of technology, followed by training and top management support.

## FUTURE ISSUES

Now looking at future issues, I asked, "What Changes Do You Foresee in the Policy and Role of the Information Center?" The top response with an overwhelming eighty-three percent was for "More emphasis on meeting the strategic needs of the organization." Education and training and better planning were the next highest responses. When the question of future changes was analyzed based on the age of the IC, two trends were evident. First, the concern for better planning increased with the age of the IC. And conversely, the importance of education and training decreased with age. The top consideration of all age categories was for placing more emphasis on meeting the strategic needs of the organization. When future changes were compared relative to whether the IC was PC or mainframe based, there were no major trends or significant differences noted.

Included in this handout are graphical representations of the above findings

## WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN?

Just as child passes into and through adolescence there is a tremendous amount of change, we must realize that the needs of the IC also change as it passes through different stages. We must position ourselves to be flexible enough to change the policies and roles to meet those needs as they arise.

Listed below is a summary of the changing issues for different stages of Information Centers:

NEW:

- Heavy top management support
- User involvement in design
- Heaviest emphasis of training
- Smaller scope and audience.
- Creation of a small success and the need to build upon it
- Not yet concerned with how it fits into strategic plan
- Tools and data available

YOUNG:

- Diminished education
- Mass audience - middle managers
- Expanded audience
- Computer literate and sophisticated users
- Need to think about standard hardware and software
- Need to begin to think of improvements
- Where does it fit in the organization?
- Do you really want to access the mainframe from your PC?

MATURE:

Emphasis on meeting strategic needs of the organization

Audience moves across functional boundaries

With computer literate users, demands are not so easy to satisfy

Where does the IC staff fit within the organization?

Now there are some pretty sharp users in departments. Use them to be a buffer to the IC staff.

How will departmental computing affect the IC?

More resources are applied to the IC. Therefore a need for better planning.

Top management is now part of the audience. One-on-one training essential.

Integration of office technology, personal computers, departmental computing, local area networks adds to the confusion.

### WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Research suggests that end-user computing will continue to grow and is expected to capture seventy-five percent of computer resources by 1990. Currently, there is a feeling that the Information Center takes a back seat to some of the more traditional DP roles. As the number of users increases, the role of the IC will become more and more important. The IC should be perceived as a tool to allow the users to gain access to the data they need and to analyze it in a way they see fit, when they see fit,

without any interaction from the MIS/DP department. This will allow the MIS/DP departments to work on "more strategic systems." But are they saying the IC is not strategic? If the IC helps management make better decisions and increase the bottom line, then of course it is strategic.

As the IC changes and matures, its audience also changes. More and more, top management is becoming aware of the usefulness of the IC. The new audience is different from the "mass users or the middle manager." The IC manager must be willing to adapt. With the new set of users, the need for one-on-one training increases. Also, the IC must be easier to use. Middle managers may be willing to go through a four step logon sequence. However, this is beyond the frustration level of many top managers. In

many organizations, top management travels quite a bit and doesn't want to have to re-learn complex commands and syntax.

As the IC matures, the kinds of information provided the users must also change. The mature IC must go beyond providing the downloading of data into some spreadsheet model for more analysis. The IC manager must look for ways to use the power of the IC to help the organization meet its business objectives. Of course, the IC manager must first learn and understand the strategic issues of the business. The manager must be willing to change not only the tools, information and services he/she offers, but also must provide the direction for helping the organization meet its strategic goals.

In conclusion, the policies and roles of the IC change as the IC goes through different stages in its life cycle. These changes not only include the IC concept itself, but also the IC manager and staff. The IC manager must become more business oriented to ensure that the business needs are met.

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