

Management Agenda

It's Easy To Be Difficult

Some computer environments are easy to learn; others are easy to use. Finding one that's easy on both counts is the hard part.

Microsoft, Apple, and just about everyone else in the computer business likes to brag about the progress they've made when it comes to ease of use. But they're really talking about ease of learning. Computers, in some ways, are actually getting *harder* to use.

There is a difference between ease of use and ease of learning. Some things are both hard to learn and to do. Other things are easy to learn, yet difficult to do. I long for a computing environment that makes both learning and doing easy.

For example, take something as simple as turning off your PC. In the days of MS-DOS, all you had to do was exit your application program and turn off the machine. Now you have to shut down Windows or the Mac operating system, lest you leave open files all over the place. That process takes more time.

Clearly, the Windows 95 and Macintosh interfaces are easier to learn than MS-DOS and other early operating systems, but that doesn't make them easier to use. Ease of use is an issue not only for novices but experienced users as well. WordStar—a long-defunct word-processing program that ran under CP/M and MS-DOS—was tricky to learn, but once you passed the learning curve it was a breeze.

We've even moved backward when it comes to the layout of computers. The Apple II, most old CP/M machines, and original IBM PC keyboards had the "Ctrl" key just to the left of the letter "A" so you could reach it with your left pinkie. But when IBM introduced the 101 keyboard, it swapped "Ctrl" with the seldom-

used "Caps-Lock" key so that both "Ctrl" and "Alt" are now on the bottom row—requiring you to move your whole hand to issue a command.

Some people think PCs will be easier to use when we can communicate with them via speech or handwriting. I disagree. Speech recognition has its place, especially for people with disabilities, but it isn't more

efficient for entering text or commands. I find it faster and not as tiring to type keystrokes than to talk to my PC. Handwriting recognition is even more problematic. Even if we could get machines to accurately interpret handwriting, it's not necessarily progress. A good touch-typist can type five times faster than most people can write.

Ted Selker, a fellow at IBM's user systems ergonomic research division in San Jose, Calif., is doing some interesting work on user interfaces. He developed the TrackPoint pointing device used on IBM ThinkPad notebooks that lets you move your cursor without having to take your hands off the keyboard. This little device has done more to improve my productivity with a notebook than all the advances made by Intel, Microsoft, or anyone else.

Selker recently showed me an input device he's working on for handheld machines. Rather than fool around with something like handwriting recognition, he's developed a one-handed "half-QWERTY" keyboard that has full-sized keys—but only half as many of them as a regular keyboard has. You type with your right hand, and when you need to type a key normally found on the left side, you press a key that turns the keyboard into a mirror image of the left side of the keyboard. If you have the regular key-

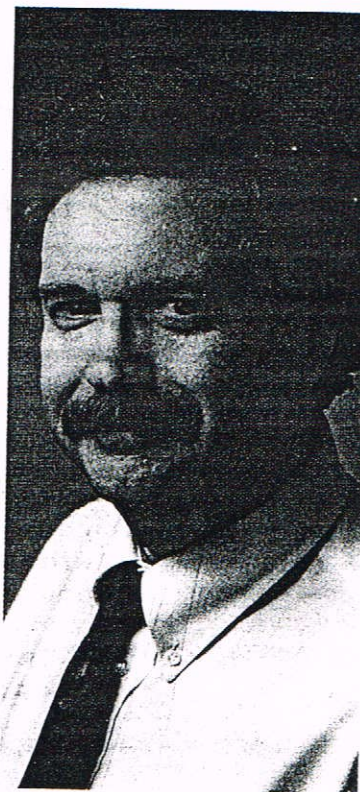
board memorized, it's easy to use. The system works because it's in tune with the way your body works. Selker's ultimate goal is to develop even more systems that are in sync with human physiology.

I don't know if this keyboard will ever make it into a product, and I'm not sure it would meet the approval

of analysts and focus groups, let alone IBM's product-development

cycle. Still, it's refreshing to see someone who's willing to perform some wild experiments in his search for a more perfect union between humans and machines.

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