

The Trainer in the Machine

I bank at an automatic teller, which, when my account is in the red, abandons the language of an efficient if brusque clerk ("Insert card!") for that of a funeral director discreetly bearing bad news ("Your transaction cannot be processed."). At such moments, which always seem to occur after banking hours, I am reawakened to the need for a human element in computers.

Much is made of the non-human aspect of computers. They are valued for being fast, egoless, tireless, obedient and for never forgetting what you tell them. They are good trainers. They can teach complex business skills to managers with a greater command of data for case histories and application exercises than many trainers can manage. "They reduce everything to task," John Van Zwieten says admiringly of some computer-based management training programs he reviewed for this issue of the *Journal*.

We often report in these pages what computers, used judiciously, can do for training. But it's important to keep asking what training can do for computers, as John does in his article and Malcolm Knowles did (*TDJ*, May 1983) when he took the computer industry to task for its failure to make machines and software more learner centered.

Training has influenced all kinds of software that teaches: We see the inclusion of application exercises, feedback, self-evaluation and guided discovery in many computer-based workbooks and training programs. The part of training that facilitates the transmission and application of knowledge is finding its way into personal computer software. But the part that deals with the

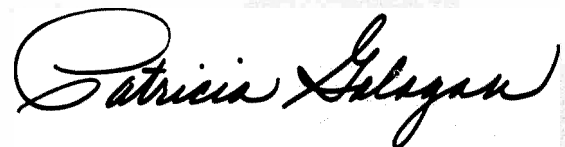
development of the person, the career, the organization is slower to appear.

Shouldn't trainers push their corporations to include human resource development principles in the computer-based systems they will design for their managers? How about computers that aren't just user friendly but user benevolent? How about user-developing software that monitors and reports not only on the mastery of a subject but on one's progress along a scale of excellence, toward a career goal? How about a computer that redesigns your job to make it more rewarding to use the computer?

I don't intend this as an argument for electronic evaluation in the Big Brother sense, but as an argument for a human development component where it is appropriate in the application of computer technology. Humanism doesn't sell software, of course, but it's often argued that the development of human capital, by whatever means, contributes to increased productivity.

Personal computers will soon be a mass market appliance. They are tools that training cannot afford to ignore. When a technology appears, it will be used, and the time is ripe for trainers to influence the potential of this powerful medium to monitor, promote, encourage and reward not just learning but human development.

Then, for instance, my computer/teller could train me to manage my cash flow or to understand its record-keeping system, rather than leaving me broke without warning or explanation. But I guess one can't expect money from a machine and training too.



Editor