October 1994 Editorials

The October 1994 issue of The Computing Teacher contained two distinct editorials:


Editorial #1: What Computer Should I Buy?

Sidebar: Dave Moursund is Editor-in-Chief of The Computing Teacher and Executive Officer of ISTE. He has been teaching, writing, and speaking in the field of computer technology in education since 1963. In this new column, he offers answers to questions from readers.

Q. What computer should I (we) buy?

A. Parents and educators asking the question often expect me to tell them the exact machine that is the best buy to fit their needs. However, I am seldom able or willing to do this.

There is no one best computer system for all needs. (Suppose there were. Don't you think that enough people would have discovered this so that all other computer companies would have gone out of business?)

The question about what computer to buy serves as an opening to a dialogue between a consultant and a client. How does a professional consultant handle such a task?

In the initial interaction, the consultant attempts to determine what the client knows about computer systems and their uses. The consultant determines whether the client wants a "turnkey" solution or wants to be seriously involved in helping to formulate an answer to the question.

In a turnkey approach, the client hires people to analyze the problem; make appropriate decisions; acquire the needed hardware, software, and support materials; and train the staff. If the overall choice and implementation of computer systems proves to be less than adequate, the client can blame the consultant.

In the client education approach, the consultant serves in the role of a personal tutor and a source of information. The consultant helps the client to learn enough to guide the decision making and implementation process. The client ends up with a great deal of knowledge and personal involvement in the overall process. If the net result is not satisfactory, it is the client who must assume responsibility.
You can see why I have difficulty responding to the "What computer should I buy?" question. I am not being asked to either deliver a turnkey system or to do client education. Thus, for the most part I do not attempt to provide an answer.

However, there is one set of circumstances in which I do provide some specifics. If parents indicate that the goal is to provide a computer for their child to use for academic purposes, the answer tends to be simple. I tell the parent to find out what the school is using. Get hardware and software that is compatible with what the school is using and is somewhat close to the best that the school has available. If the school is hopelessly out of date, I tell the parent to look at other schools and the school their child will attend in the future.

I also provide a few general guidelines. Think in terms of the computer system serving your child for about four or five years. Think about repair and upgrade services over this four to five year period. Will the manufacturers and vendors still be in business? Think about who will help your child to learn. Appropriate learning help and guidance is the key to making a worthwhile investment in technology.

**Editorial # 2: What Are Your Thoughts on Donated Equipment?**


Q. People have proposed that businesses should donate old computer equipment to schools. This is being done in California on a wide scale basis. What do you think about this idea?

A. For the most part, I think this is a poor idea. The companies making the donation feel that the equipment is no longer cost effective for their own use. They feel that it is well worth the hardware, software, and training costs to install newer equipment.

One obvious educational problem is the limited capabilities of such donated equipment relative to the demands of the newer software and courseware. Another is the reliability and maintenance problem.

There are many hidden costs in this computer donation program. For example, many school board members and school administrators think that the key issue is the student to computer ratio. If the ratio can be improved by donated equipment, they may feel that the problem is solved. They no longer need to be concerned with needed permanent changes in the budget to support up-to-date computer-related technology.

However, there is a deeper issue. Recently I was talking with an executive from General Motors. At one time GM used to donate old equipment to technical institutes. These technical institutes ended up with lots of five year old equipment. They [the technical institutes] argued that training and education in this environment was totally inappropriate for preparing students to move into the types of job openings that GM and other companies have available. GM agreed
with this argument. It dropped its program of donating out of date equipment and began donating state of the art equipment.

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