



## MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Once upon a time, ADP and EDP were the acronyms for computer data processing. (Automated Data Processing and Electronic Data Processing). Then a guru somewhere decided to call it MIS (Management Information Systems), implying that the data was collected, processed, sifted and regurgitated to inform managers so they could manage their operations efficiently and effectively.

At the turn of the last century, someone decided to call the whole thing IT (Information Technology), taking management out of the picture entirely. This may have been done out of spite, as computer programmers expressed frustration when managers ignored the data staring them in the face, making decisions based on tea leaves or I Ching readings.

But make no mistake, data can only become “information” only when it is assembled in a coherent form, and provided to the appropriate people, in a timely and relevant fashion.

If you have the soul of a manager, then you clamor for data. Depending on your responsibilities, you have an insatiable need to know where things stand in a hundred areas. Teachers and school principals need to know if their students are learning. Parole officers need to know if their parolees are keeping out of trouble (gainfully employed, or earning passing marks in school or job training). Medical professionals monitor vital signs of their patients (sometimes on a minute-by-minute basis with the help of computer technology). Finance officers need to know if there is enough money left in their budget to pay that voucher.

Maybe you don’t care about staff turnover, retirement eligibility, client recidivism in the justice system (adult criminal or juvenile). Maybe you don’t care whether a voucher is processed in a timely fashion (it’s not your money that pays the interest penalty). Maybe you don’t care if a major traffic intersection has a disproportionate number of accidents. And you don’t care if the train is late from New York City.

If you have total disinterest in information, then you are not a manager, and you may even be dead. Because “inquiring minds want to know”. Maybe you manage a fantasy baseball team,



and constantly update the statistics on your batters and pitchers (rbi’s, era’s, bob’s, etc.). Maybe you keep track of all the numbers picked each night by Yolanda Vega. Daily statistics like the Dow Jones, barometric pressure readings or wind chill may influence your investments, gardening or skiing.

A new TV show, **NUM3ERS** tells us that numbers are all around. Insurance actuaries know a few things about numbers. Economists claim to know even more things about numbers, and most of us know that you cannot balance your checkbook with little lead weights.

Still, you may ask “When does data become information?”

A number of years ago IBM ran a color print advertisement that looked something like this:

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At the time, they were trying to sell color monitors (a luxury then, a run-of-the-mill commodity now). The point was without special treatment, we can all drown in the sea of data that is out there.



## Internal Control – More Than a Good Idea – It’s Also the Law!



I would make an additional point – unless you make it clear to your IT (information technology) people what you need to know – the kind of decisions you need to make, the resources to be invested in such decisions, the impact of such decisions on world peace, the economy or good dental hygiene, then your IT people will just be alienated technologists – who will look upon you “surface people” as Eloi, while they work in the dark, underground as Morlocks. See H.G. Wells *Time Machine* for details.

Of course, the IT folks will not make your data needs a priority unless they see evidence that you 1) care about the data; 2) make valid decisions based on the data; and 3) your decisions make a positive impact on the people of New York State. Yes, they can also help the people of Ohio or Vermont, but they have their own way of doing things.

**If you have the soul of a manager**, you will have an insatiable need for more data, faster data, more relevant data, data you can synthesize into INFORMATION. Maybe you are monitoring ground water contamination levels around a landfill, PCBs in the Hudson River, or acid rain in the Adirondacks (most of which comes from Ohio, I think). Or then there is the alarming incidence of asthma in our next generation. Or the paucity of engineers graduating from our universities. Or the number of potholes on I-90.

There is an old axiom (there are rarely new axioms) *“If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it.”* Some folks just throw in the towel, and assert the second half of the axiom. These are called “experienced managers”. It is too late for them – they’ve burned out from years of inadequate data support. But there is hope for you IF you start clamoring now for timely and relevant information.

Maybe you will need to start collecting it the old-fashioned way. Ask people questions.



Keep a paper log of transactions. Start numbering incoming correspondence. Maintain key statistics on 3 X 5 cards.

Start a checklist. Include key statistics in your monthly report. It might impress your boss, but it will help whoever follows you in your position.

Establish realistic goals, set deadlines, then monitor results. If the NYS Education Department can renew an RN’s certification in 24 hours, maybe you can inspect and recertify that day care center in 30 days.

Do you need to expand your RFP mailing list? Try “Googling” potential vendors via the Internet. Network with peers in other/comparable agencies (we are all in this together – maybe they know something useful). Boldly go where none have gone before (just be sure to get competitive bids, and save your receipts).

**Here is where you have to do a little something on your own:** Make a list of your key functions.

What are the goals? What risks must you avoid in order to meet those goals? Then make a list of the kinds of data that would help achieve positive results. Are there mandated deadlines? Will delay in processing hurt a citizen, client, patient, student, taxpayer, applicant or vendor? Who can you assign to handle those key functions? Do you have useful procedures written down, or have you got trained staff to rely on? When is Louise retiring? Can you get out before she does?



**If you don’t have the soul of a manager**, pass this two-page treatise on to someone who does.