A sequel to EWD977 (18.9.1986)

I regard the computing community as a collective victim of the computer salesmen. Take, for example, the word processor.

In this country, where the Protestant work ethic is predominant, everyone feels good if he is busy, and as a result it was possible to sell the word processor as a time-saving device. The irony of the situation is, however, that, as a commercial product, the word processor was so successful because, in actual fact, its usage costs time; as a result, it makes its user even more busy and feeling even better. It is the ideal tool for those that can confuse activity with work.

I have often been asked why I don't use that type of equipment, and my honest answer has always been that there is for me so much to write that I cannot afford the use of these time-saving devices. The reactions range from disbelief to anger.

The experiments have been taken with people that were both experienced writers in longhand and experienced users of word processors. The outcome was, firstly, that the linguistic quality of the mechanically produced letters was not noticeably lower than that of the hand-written ones, and, secondly, that they had taken 50%

more time to be written. I concluded that probably no country can afford the human cost involved in widespread use of such equipment. And indeed; the other week I heard of a recent analysis why American industry has such a poor performance and a main cause turned out to be the low productivity of the white-collar workers, a low productivity that could be traced to over-automation of the office. I was not amazed.

I also know why that equipment is so time-consuming to use: it is so easy to make a change in your text. It is an open invitation to write first, and to correct and improve later. I know that some schools of English composition even promote that form of iterative design as the one and only viable paradigm for writing. But I think that that is very short-sighted because in the longer run it is much more effective to train oneself to get one's texts almost always right the first time.

I think these machines should carry a notice saying: "Warning! The Educator General has determined that electronic word-processing is detrimental to your writing proficiency.".

Austin, 15 September 1986

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