

COMPUTERS ON THE JOB

by Dave Cox

Heather Menzies' new book *Computers on the Job* is a primer for the generation who will be dealing with computers as freely as their parents dealt with typewriters.

It deals with the "oncoming computer revolution" and how computers will change the workplace of the future. This "second industrial revolution" poses numerous challenges for those involved in it, which will mean many of us.

I had the opportunity of interviewing Ms. Menzies last Thursday about the book, and found it quite challenging mainly because I agreed with many of her arguments and had difficulty being critical. This is the substance of our conversation, edited a bit to make me appear a little less foolish:

Gateway: Ms. Menzies, in your book you mention that "one social forecaster in the United Kingdom predicted that 5 million Briton risk unemployment because of automation, but that 5.5 million could lose their jobs if British industries fail to automate and, as a consequence, go bankrupt". Is there any way out of these "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situations?

Menzies: We are merely players in a global market economy. Japan is now giving even the U.S. a run for its money. If you're plugged into the economy, you've got to be responsive to the market forces. This is the only way to keep a step ahead of third world competition.

Gateway: Yes, you mention in the book that the prescription for Canada is that "we need to develop...a strong electronic manufacturing capacity". Is there a current lack of what you call "the innovation phase" here?

Menzies: Yes, someone must fund those things that need to be done presently. We've gone the quantitative route here, but we sure haven't gone the qualitative route. For instance, we need to exploit our

advantage in communication. Or Alberta could become a major centre for research and development in computer applications in the resource sector.

Gateway: You speak about "the history of technology" as having "been one of control more than one of liberation".

The technology has great potential, but is it in the hands of those who can use it best? I don't think so.

and also how "in 1981 the list of people the RCMP considered to be possible security risks ran to more than half a million names". Doesn't a home-computerized society mean a more ordered, planned one?

Menzies: Yes, essentially you have the capacity for someone to keep track of your reading habits at the library, your buying habits at the store. It could be decided that you are a security risk, and you could be monitored. The potential for control is inherent, but the potential for liberation is equally inherent. We need to build into the global system those mechanisms so that we can be autonomous and private.

Gateway: Is any progress being made toward "the innovation stage"?

Menzies: There are small, incremental victories, which are inroads into the status quo, where management implements technological change. A lot of attitudes have to change. If you've invested a lot of time in an industry, you deserve a say in the future course of it.

Gateway: Are unions making progress on retraining and occupational bridging?

Menzies: The Communications Workers of Canada won in their negotiations with Bell for a joint management-labor committee on future planning.

Gateway: You say the workers' future depends of the right of participation in "design of new jobs for continuous employment"; yet "such rights are nonexistent under Canadian labor legislation"?

Menzies: I was quite vigorous in my submission to the Labor Canada Task Force on Microelectronics that workers should have this share in decision-making.

Gateway: What are the prospects for future employment in computer-related fields, what direction is computer use going? Is there a danger of the technology being misused?

Menzies: I'm certainly quite worried about it. The power is being consolidated in a few hands. Governments and corporations have bought up the technology and are implementing it in a certain way. The technology has great potential, but it is in the hands of those who can use it best? I don't think so. The technology needs to be applied in new and innovative ways.

You don't need to see it as a challenge of creating new jobs, but rather of giving the participative people a chance to produce their own work, design their own jobs. Of course that's a long way down the road, but I think it's a critical political direction we have to explore.

Gateway: Your book deals with "deskilling" and the need for greater education, and you state that "Computer

5 million Britons risk unemployment because of automation, but 5.5 million could lose their jobs if British industries fail to automate and, as a consequence, go bankrupt.

literacy is likely to become, like general literacy today, a standard prerequisite for coping in the emerging work world". Do

you see a need for greater encouragement of University computing departments and courses?

Menzies: Yes, definitely.



Heather Menzies, author of *Computers on the Job*

Gateway: The book also deals with the role of women in the workforce, and what impact computers will have on their jobs. Do you see greater opportunities opening up at present?

Menzies: No, just the opposite. Women are being relegated into the new job ghetto as data-entry clerks. Hopefully some change can be brought about, but it doesn't look good right now.

Gateway: The book is rather like a guide for all those who are only marginally computer-literate, isn't it?

Menzies: That's what I intended it to be — a guide to literacy. People don't need to be experts, they have to do what they do best, go where their talent takes them.

They have to put that tool — the computer — to work for them. If someone is born to be an architect, they have to do that. The computer can help them in design, accounting, bookkeeping.

The main reason I wrote the book was to speak to those people who in the here-and-now need to adapt to what's happen-

ing. My first responsibility is to the people who are afraid of the technology. I intend it to be a useful manual for them.

The only postscript necessary might be drawn from the book itself: "If we don't master this technology as a tool, we will be mastered by its ends and subjugated to its technique."

Rothman's refused.

OTTAWA (CUP) — The student federation at the University of Ottawa has refused more than \$3,000 in sponsorship funds from Craven A cigarettes because of that company's involvement in South Africa.

Craven A, a Rothman's Pall Mall product, hoped to sponsor Welcome Week at the university by offering \$2,000, the use of an antique car for campus tours, 50 T-shirts, six monthly pub nights and \$1,100 towards a concert.

Since there is no pub at the university, Craven A would have sponsored federation social activities for five or six months.

The student federation unanimously agreed to drop the Craven A sponsorship because the company is based in apartheid South Africa. Federation members also felt a more health oriented product should be used to promote events.

But Rothman's products will still be available on campus and there are no plans for a total boycott.

The federation will now sponsor Welcome Week and Jim Bardach, social activities commissioner said there are no financial problems with this arrangement.

DINWOODIE
2nd Floor SUB

Friday, October 1 8 pm.
BAVARIAN FEST
Sponsored by BACUS

Saturday, October 2 8 pm.
THE REDS
Sponsored by Education Students' Association

Tickets are available from the SUB Box-Office (2nd Floor, SUB) and various club members.

Note: These events are open only to U of A students, staff, and guests. Absolutely no minors admitted!

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