

Editorial

John Mitchell

“Nights in white satin, never reaching the end. Letters I’ve written, never meaning to send. Beauty I’d always missed, with these eyes before, Just what the truth is, I can’t say anymore. Some try to tell me, thoughts they cannot defend, Just what you want to be, you will be in the end”.

When the Moody Blues first sung those lines way back in 1967, little did they realize the impact that they would have on a young(ish) computer auditor a decade later. In the late nineteen seventies I was an ‘Assistant Audit Manager (DP)’ for the then Eastern Region of British Gas. I had got the job by playing the ‘genius’ principle. For those of you in need of education in how to bluff (which I assume is very few of you) the genius principle works on the basis that if you know one percent more on a particular subject than someone who knows nothing, then you appear to be a genius. When I went along to my interview I was a senior systems analyst at a London local authority, but prior to that I had been a systems analyst at Rolls Royce aero engines and my only knowledge of computer auditing was a five day course that a far sited audit manager at that company had persuaded my boss to let me go on. It wasn’t totally altruistic on his side as Rolls Royce was desperately trying to document its accounting systems, which had been written in-house at a time when documentation came second place to implementation (so no change then). I was teamed up with a ‘systems accountant’. Me to supply the systems bit and him the accounting bit. As a result of the course and the subsequent work I got a taste for control processes, so when the British Gas job came along I rolled up for the interview, full of trepidation for I had discovered through diligent research that not only did the enterprise have an active computer audit presence (there were around forty of them throughout the company and this was in 1977), but my predecessor in the roll had recently decamped to be the Group Computer auditor manager at headquarters. I need not have worried too much. Computer audit was in its infancy, the CISA qualification was some five years in the future and the audit manager who interviewed me was an accountant of the old school, so a little application of the genius principle went a long way.

So I got the job and started my computer audit career. I soon found that British gas was streaks ahead of anyone else. We had something called ‘The Computer Audit Guidelines’ which were updated at least annually, and more frequently as required, at a full meeting of the company’s twelve Assistant Audit Manager’s (DP). Incidentally, the British Gas Computer Audit Guidelines became the CIPFA Computer Audit Guidelines under one Douglas Ebdon who had been the company’s very first Group Computer audit Manager. This was long before CobiT¹ came along. I sometimes think that we must have been like the disciples under Christ. A sense of comradeship

¹ Control Objectives for IT

mixed with lots of squabbling as we attempted to put into context the rules of computer auditing. It didn't help too much that the accountants seemed to have lots of history on 'this is how it should be done' dating back to the pharos (literally) and here were we trying to establish a new profession without a professional qualification. We initially used the Auditing By Computer Group (now IRMA) of the BCS to provide bench mark ideals and we produced a number of publications which sold quite well along the lines of 'how to audit payroll applications', but the lack of a professional qualification was sorely lacking. The BCS had yet to form its Information Systems Management Board (ISEB) and its qualification, the MBCS, was targeted at computer professionals and not hybrids like us. Meanwhile, having served my apprenticeship in Eastern Region I was promoted to Group Computer Manager at headquarters to replace Ragnall Craighead who had been so inspirational to me as one of his acolytes. That was where I first heard of the new CISA² qualification and determined to take it. Thus in 1986 I, along with around thirty other nervous students from throughout the whole of Europe, sat and fortunately passed the examination.

Which brings me back to the lines in the Moody Blues song, which have played through my head ever since, especially the lines, "just what the truth is, I can't say anymore. Some try to tell me, thoughts they cannot defend, Just what you want to be, you will be in the end". What is truth?, ask the philosophers? Can you simultaneously be ethical and yet amoral? Over the years I have learnt a couple of basic lessons. Go with your gut instant and stand by your convictions. On the rare cases when I have departed from this philosophy I have ended up with heartache and a sense of loss. I have noticed that senior management take less and less responsibility for the actions of their staff and are less likely to be hurt where it really hurts, which is in there take-home pay.

Take a few examples over the years. A ferry sinks, people lose their lives, but it is the captain's fault because he was attempting to meet company imposed turn-around times. Trains pass signals set at danger, people die, but it is the driver's fault for not seeing the poorly sited signal. Space shuttles explode, people die, but that's the risk of using advanced technology, despite the engineers pointing out the problem beforehand. Railway points fail due to poor maintenance and more people die. Eleven million customer account details are stolen on an insecure computer, the FSA impose a record fine, but the account holders whose data was stolen end up paying the fine, not the directors. Perverse, is it not? No punishment for the people at the top. Just the 'poor bloody infantry' on the ground. Our computer systems are capable of killing people too. Maybe not directly, but they control so much of the infrastructure that it's just a matter of time before one of your systems causes a fatality. So go with your gut instant when they tell you 'thoughts they cannot defend'.

² Certified Information Systems Auditor

More recently I received a response from someone at Network Rail to my request for details of how they would deal with the loss of their Kings Cross signal box. Their 'National Public Affairs Manager' states that any disruption as a result will be for the train operators to deal with. He concludes his letter with. 'I am afraid however, that it would not be possible to speculate on the engineering aspects, and infrastructure operating solutions, of a theoretical event'. You would think that Network Rail would have never heard of the application of risk management techniques? Especially in view of their ability over the years to kill their customers. The letter can be read in full on my web site www.lhscontrol.com/links.

On a lighter note Bill Thomas, Executive Vice President, EDS stated in an interview regarding government projects that, "these projects are very hard. When they go wrong, people suffer. Not just civil servants, but real people". So now we know that EDS does not consider their main customers, civil servants, to be real people. Nice to have a bit of honesty from the guy at the top for a change!

A warm welcome to Adam Carden who has joined your Management Committee as membership secretary and a sad farewell to Raghu Iyer who has had various jobs on the Committee over many years.

In this issue we have for your education and entertainment: Gordon Smith's ten questions for the CIO; digital forensics from Ian Kennedy; members' benefits from Mark Smith; a giant humour section and a 'down under' column from Bob Ashton as well as the regular updates from our Chairman and BCS headquarters.