

P.O. Box 85
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Mr. Charles R. Bowen, Manager
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Dear Charles:

Here is a first draft of the idea of how to solve the problem mentioned in section six of my letter of yesterday to Mr. Watson. First I will explain some of the history and then go into the idea of how to solve it.

Historical Introduction.

Engineers in the computer industry became generally aware of the potential problems of automation back in 1957. This concern resulted in a session on the "Social Problems of Automation" at the March 6, 1958 Western Joint Computer Conference and another session more specifically on the "Social Responsibility of Engineers.." was planned for March 1959.

A number of engineers in IBM considered writing papers, a lesser number wrote drafts, and about five papers got to the attention of IBM WHQ. Initially all papers were denied clearance, either by direct or indirect means. This censoring of papers on the social responsibility of engineers by IBM Corp. to some appeared as an attack upon the ethical principles of the major religious faiths of this country and an attack upon the codes of ethics of the engineering societies. At the time I consulted a number of Protestant Ministers, a Jesuit Philosophy Professor, and the Chancellor of a Jewish Theological Seminary. They all agreed that it was very important for the right of engineers to speak out on such issues be established. In fact some suggested having the local council of churches make a visitation to IBM. I requested that no action be taken, because I felt that problems should be solved by normal processes as far as possible.

The internal processes of the IBM system did finally result in one paper, a version of my paper, going to the March 1959 WJCC Social Responsibility Session. In spite of Mr. Watson's letter on "Speaking Out" which came out latter that year, the impression still remains among IBM engineers that speaking out on important social issues is an unpopular and hazardous hobby.

My interpretation of present company rules, although I can't find it spelled out this way is: If he is going to be identified with IBM or the subject matter relates closely to the business of IBM, he must have the paper reviewed and approved by appropriate IBM managers. This means that there is a vast area where IBM engineers may speak out on their own, provided they do not identify themselves with IBM.

To speak out on sociological issues that my conscience tells me is important, I have developed a method of separating my activities under three "hats." In this way I can clearly speak under my "philosopher's hat" without being identified with IBM. This permits me to live up to my own conscience, the standards of the National Society of Professional Engineers, and IBM policies.

The Present Situation.

In Business Machines (Dec. 1963) Mr. T. J. Watson, Jr., shows a clear and urgent interest in the problems of our country in the article "The Chairman Speaks on Technology and Unemployment." Now I think the best source of ideas for attacking the problems outlined by Mr. Watson are the engineers who are working on the technologies which generate the computers and automation which create the social problems. In my 1959 WJCC paper I outlined procedures for computer engineers to communicate their ideas to appropriate social scientists, lawyers, philosophers, and other specialists.

Unfortunately most IBM engineers with whom I casually discuss the sociological problems of society indicate that they don't feel free to actively bring up such ideas, yet I find that many have on their own thought of some of the same ideas which I have developed, but they have not pursued them. Our country is losing a potential source of leads to the solution of our national problems due to the inhibition of large segments of the engineering profession.

A Proposed Solution.

What is needed is to establish a degree of confidence that IBM Corp. is really interested in engineers living up to their own conscience, religious convictions, or engineering ethics in regard to the consideration of the social problems of automation. I don't think an investigation, survey, or announcement of new policies would bring the resources to play. I think something like an autogenous vaccine is needed. I think the situation is like the case where a doctor has a patient with an undiagnosed stubborn disease where they take a culture from the patient and inject a horse to produce a serum, even they don't know precisely what the disease is.

I suggest that we pick a horse, possibly the IBM News, National Edition. Some small articles could be injected over a period of time reporting examples of cases where IBMers have participated in discussions of the social problems of automation and related fields, so that gradually IBM engineers would see that this is acceptable behavior in IBM. The series might be started by a few historical articles with bibliographies. Some articles could be run in a form to promote letters to the editor.

Some topics would have to occur in season to avoid appearing forced. Namely the display of the N.S.P.E. Professional Policies, Creed of the Engineer, etc., would be appropriate say during Engineer's Week in February. Following that some examples of what engineers have done in accordance with the policies might be run.

It might be desirable to test this procedure on a more limited scale in one IBM Division or with one laboratory for a trial run.

I shall be glad to discuss these and other ideas.

Sincerely yours,

Frederick B. Wood

CC: D. Royse
R. B. Johnson

P.S.: Since drafting this letter I have had a long talk with Mr. R. B. Johnson. He has pointed out that I am bringing up questions that must be decided at a higher level than his laboratory. We have concluded that I should examine whether there is a place in IBM where I might deal more directly with these sociological questions. Also I could improve the content of this letter, but I am too tired at present, so I will send it on as is.

F.B.W.