

INTERDEPARTMENTAL

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY CAMBRIDGE, MASS. 02139

from the office of Information Processing Services

January 28, 1970

To: J. R. Steinberg

From: J. M. Grochow

Subject: On-Line Information Files

It is viewed as a major asset of a time-sharing system if a user in trouble can obtain information about the system on-line; that is, while he is logged in. It appears to me that there are several ways of accomplishing this:

1. Have some sort of inter-process communications set up such that a user can "talk" directly with a system programmer during all or some of the hours of the day.
2. Have a sufficient number of on-line information files so that the user can simply read one or more of them and find the answer to his problem.

While (1) is probably desirable, it is obviously difficult because of the manpower problem. Solution (2), however, is more difficult because of the necessity of determining all the problems a user might run into and providing a short tutorial on the subject. There is also the problem that a user might not even know what his problem really is. Can we design a set of question-answer files in such a way that the typical user will be guided through a short set of explanations to his problem? This is the task which I propose we investigate.

I think that writing these question-answer files will obviously be an interactive process. I also think that we can do a fairly good first cut without too much difficulty. Both Tom Van Vleck and I will, of course, help any of your personnel as much as we can. There are also the three IPC staff members working for John McManus who can be of assistance.

There already exists a command known as "help" (see the Multics Programmers Manual). It allows a user to read various files in the directory user_dir_dir message whose second names are "info" (news.info, pli.info, etc.). These files are arranged so that several lines will be printed and the command will then ask:

More help?

to which, the user must answer "yes" or "no". If "yes", then a few more lines are

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printed, and so on. There are several problems with this command:

1. Each "subject" must be in a different file, thus wasting much space (very few files are a full page long).
2. If "no" is typed, the command exits. It should ask if there is any other file you wish to look at.
3. Perhaps the command should ask some leading questions to direct you to information that you are looking for (perhaps these questions should be in a special type of "help" file that the command always interrogates first).
4. An optional argument, "all", should suppress the "More help?" question and just print the entire file.

I'm sure that in your experience with user problems that you will have many ideas to supplement mine. I think that providing easy-to-use learning tools for users is an area which deserves our immediate and continuing attention.

cc: Multics Administrative Distribution
Victor L. Voydock



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copies to
Daley
Sally
Clingen
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January 26, 1970

Mr. Carl Ehlers
Mail Code 307
General Electric NED
175 Curtner Avenue
San Jose, California 95125

Dear Mr. Ehlers:

The following is an outline of the presentation on Multics which Jerry Grochow and I are preparing for GESHUA X.

- I. Introduction to Multics
 - A. History
 - B. Goals
 - C. Features

- II. Status and Plans
 - A. Equipment
 - B. Operating statistics
 - C. Plans

We hope to have some mimeographed handouts summarizing the talk to distribute at the session; please let me know about how many you think we should bring.

If we can arrange to get access to an appropriate terminal (say a TermiNet 300), we could demonstrate the system informally sometime for those who were interested. If this is possible and desirable, how can we set one up?

Please contact me at (617) 864-6900, ext. 1749 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Thomas H. Van Vleck
Manager, Planning and Systems Analysis

cc: W. Burner
J. Grochow
R. Scott
M. Allison
F. Corbatot