

ON EDGE

Our series of articles describing vertical software continues with a look at a suite of programs based on assessments of personality characteristics and designed to help business people plan strategies for working with colleagues and clients.

An intermediate step toward artificial intelligence has been taken by Human Edge Software, a California-based programming house. Human Edge programs are sophisticated commercial decision-making tools that work quickly through large amounts of data supplied by the user, evaluate the data according to stored criteria, then produce a recommended course of action. The Human Edge is a suite of four programs — Communications Edge, Sales Edge, Management Edge and Negotiation Edge — for IBM and IBM-compatible machines. The complete suite costs nearly £1,000 and claims to 'increase a user's individual professional skills' in the areas specified in the names of the individual programs. A scaled-down version, called Mind Prober, is available for the Commodore 64, Apple II and Macintosh, using the same techniques, but we will focus here on the four-program suite.

The programs are said to be the outcome of more than ten years of development, involving the work of behavioural scientists and business experts and incorporating new techniques such as human factors analysis, expert systems technology and decision theory mathematics.

This description sounds rather dramatic and coupled with the cost of the programs could intimidate the potential user. However, the programs are easy to use and can be operated fully after less than an hour's self-teaching. They are all menu-driven, being built around lengthy questionnaires consisting of a series of carefully worded statements with which users are asked to agree or disagree. The statements query the significant personality characteristics of the user, as well as his sales prospects, current clients, company subordinates and superiors, and whichever aspect of business relations the user wishes to investigate.

Responses are evaluated by the program and a detailed report, including a recommended course of action, is prepared. The recommendation may be a suggested opening approach to a new client, an effective closing strategy for a difficult sales prospect, or negotiation techniques to use with employees or employers.

Each program begins with a self-assessment questionnaire, presenting statements such as: 'I

take charge in most meetings', 'I argue with others more than most', 'I am somewhat impulsive', and so on. The user decides whether the statement is an accurate description of himself, then enters his response. The self-assessment tool has been prepared effectively, with a considerable overlapping of questions as an internal measure of validity. Thus, the user's responses to 'I am somewhat impulsive' and the later statement 'I sometimes act without thinking' will be evaluated against one another for consistency. When this section is complete, the responses are stored on disk. They can be updated and reused at any time.

Once the self-assessment has been made, the user is asked to agree or disagree with a series of adjectives as they relate to the object of enquiry. Words such as talkative, apprehensive, independent, achieving, ambitious, courteous, flaunting and empathetic are used to help the user gauge his client, employer or subordinate. When working through this list, it might be helpful to have a good American dictionary at hand to help in understanding some of the terms, since the Oxford English Dictionary, doesn't recognise 'empathetic'. A common definition would be 'aware of another, compassionate', although the more common English usage is 'empathic'.

The user can move through the list of adjectives and change responses at any time. As with the self-



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