In 1970, computers were being used throughout the Fortune 1000 Companies. Computers required the creation of large in house staffs of technical people to design, build and operate automated systems.

Programmers and system analysts became the high priests guarding the temple of automation. They determined who got system resources and how they were used. Solutions were imposed on users. Often decisions were made based on what was the latest technology that the programmers wanted to try out.

During the mid seventies, a quiet revolution got started. The people using computers were becoming more vocal in requesting, or even demanding, systems which were more responsive to their needs.

In 1974, a technically oriented analyst, working for one of the world’s largest financial institutions, was given an assignment. He was to install a new accounting system in one of the subsidiaries.

His first step was to interview the “end users” for whom the system had been purchased. The goal was to understand the environment within which the system would be used. However, the result was much more important. It became obvious that the system, while technically superior, could be very difficult for the accountants to use.

Based on these findings, a great deal of additional time was invested in training the accounting department and getting the users involved. The result: a potential disaster was averted and the system was installed and working smoothly. It proved that data processing people could work with non technical users and succeed.

The conclusion was obvious. Users could not just be considered a cog on a wheel. They were (and are) the most important element in any system.

Birth of a Company . . .

In 1976, Steven Epner left the world of large financial systems to start a new company dedicated to the end users of computer systems. User Group, Inc., was born. The name told it all: “Users were the reasons for systems. This consulting firm would work with business people to use computers effectively.”

Over the years, the capabilities of the User Group have grown. Strategic information planning, forecasting, information audits and other services have been added. However, the guiding principle is still to work in the language of business and, to use technical expertise to produce results.

“The OOPS Factor.” (Computer Decisions January, 1976) was the first of many articles published by User Group staff on this topic. It described the affect of not fully considering the end users during system design/selection.

When the system is first being installed, users will come forward and say, “OOPS, you forgot something.” Then the system may have to be redone, junked, or modified at a very high cost to the company and the department for which it was intended. OOPS stands for: Ordinary Oversights Postpone Systems.

User Group helped popularize the use of design teams which included non-technical personnel from the department which would eventually rely on the system to do their jobs. Technical system specifications were replaced by User Guides which could be understood and reviewed for accuracy and completeness.

User Group Today . . .

Today, the firm has become very involved with the selection, installation and use of computers in small to medium sized companies. “We still help people get the most out of their automation dollars. Even with the more sophisticated user today, there is the potential for disaster,” according to Epner.

All to often, especially with first time users, businesses look only to the sales staff of vendors and computer stores for help. Years ago, computing solutions were constrained by technology and the technicians who had to work with it. The sales staff may constrain the answer based on the seller’s profit and not the best solution for the purchaser. They will only sell what they
“Today, the firm has become very involved with the selection, installation and use of computers in small to medium sized companies.”

can make money on. It may not be a bad solution, but rarely will it be the best.

User Group works with its clients to first define current and future requirements. “If you don’t know where you are going, it is almost impossible to get there,” says Tom Jones, the Senior Consultant working with AWCI members. “Automation is too important a decision to trust to luck. We rely on a structured approach which assures that all decisions are based on a solid foundation.”

“Knowing exactly what a client needs, allows us to find and compare viable alternatives. Our technical expertise and knowledge of the industry is used to evaluate the alternatives. Each proposed solution is analyzed for Cost, Benefits and Risks (CBR Analysis is the name User Group has given this process).

CBR Analysis provides an objective means to compare alternatives. Final decisions can be based on solid business reasoning and not technical magic. It also makes sure that the business owners and managers are part of the decision making process and that they understand how and why solutions differ.

Maintaining an environment which encourages good business thinking requires the development of a very special staff. All Senior Consultants at User Group have a minimum of 10 years of experience in the information industry. Each has been responsible for business functions and understands the pressures associated with running an organization.

Frequently, our consultants are asked for assistance in areas beyond the pure technical. Long range information plans turn into long range business planning. Even the definition of requirements often leads into a re-evaluation of the company’s existing systems and procedures.

Within the consulting industry, User Group founded the Independent Computer Consultants Association. This international organization of over 5000 consultants, works to improve professionalism among its members.

“We are very proud of our reputation and accomplishments,” according to Epner. “Yet, even after eleven years in business, we constantly strive to do better and to find more ways to help our clients be successful.”

Editor’s Note: User Group, Inc., a charter member of the new AWCI Consulting Team, may be reached at (314) 567-9708.