Book Reviews

The need for a dialogue between business strategists and the planners and implementers of information systems has been obvious for some time.

The use of information technology (IT) to gain a strategic competitive advantage is a growing theme in the thinking of senior executives.

To achieve the interconnection of the business and IT planning processes a methodology is needed. The requirements for the methodology are (a) that it should encompass all aspects of the business and all information, (b) that it should be practicable, and (c) that it should be intelligible to both managers and IT specialists.

Curtice sets out to tackle the problem of controlling information systems development and operation, by adopting strategic business goals as his yardstick rather than return on investment. In doing so, he describes a way in which IT can be brought under stricter control and directed at more important objectives. Moreover, his intention is to enable firms to maintain control over a long time-scale.

Strategic Value Analysis (SVA) is an attempt at information systems planning methodology. It appears to be intelligible to information systems staff and should be added relatively easily to their existing practices. The potential value of a system to the achievement of strategic goals is used to determine priorities at all levels. For the manager with little or no knowledge of IT (and little desire to acquire any), SVA has the advantage of looking at business units, strategies, and operations of those units in ways which should be familiar.

It is difficult to put anything creative into a methodology and it would be unrealistic to expect otherwise. SVA is a systematic approach with minimal requirements for inspiration. Nonetheless, there is a creative aspect to the use of IT which has to be recognized, even if Curtice cannot give it much scope.

While mention is made of the way in which proprietary systems are to be included, the methodology is clearly intended for bespoke information systems. The place of complete packages (e.g. office systems) or of personal computers is much less clear. Nor is it clear how SVA would cope with assessing a proposal for a firm to use artificial intelligence.

There appears to be a bias towards clients with strong information systems departments for whom SVA would allow a significant re-orientation towards the aims of the business.

Curtice presents the ideas clearly in a very short book, made shorter than its 113 pages suggests by the inclusion of a good many illustrations. Many of these illustrations are of the output of a proprietary computer package related to the methodology, are poor in quality, and take up a disproportionate amount of space for their rather limited value. SVA is stated too briefly here to give a rigorous assessment. A great many questions are prompted about how it works in particular circumstances. Nonetheless, it is a useful step in linking information systems with business goals.

Ewan Sutherland

David Harvey is well-known as the editor of *Business Computing & Communications*; therefore his little book comes from one who is constantly judging what others have to say about the way computers are applied to business. He now has his own say. This is a good thing as he is a highly articulate person and has understood how to deal with the smoke-screens that surround the