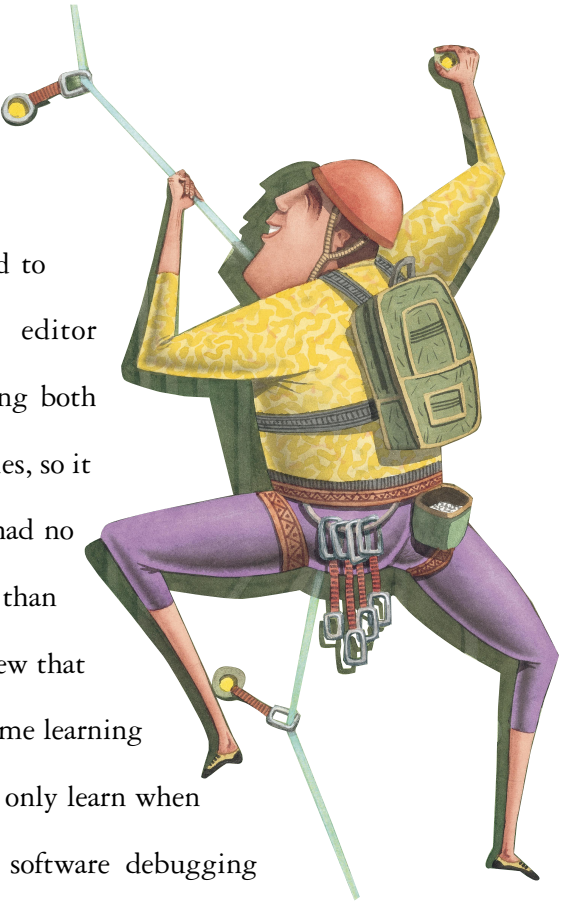
Electronic Performance Support Systems



The origin of Electronic Performance Support Systems was simply the need to use technology to connect knowledge resources that seemed to complement each other. In guest editor Richard Horn's particular case, he was engaged in creating both tutorials and online reference material for software companies, so it was natural to assume that end users had computers and had no other way to learn or support themselves using the software than by using what was provided with the software. He also knew that most purchasers of software did not want to spend much time learning it, but want to open the packaging, load the software, and only learn when it was necessary to do so. One software debugging product for which he was creating support materials had the ability to effectively run two programs at the same time in a single-tasking DOS environment—something one needs to do to debug programs. He used the debugging program to spy on itself and found a way to run the customer's software program while tutorials and online reference systems were running as well. The end result was a seamless environment of the application software, learning system, reference system, and advisor system.

Olivier Fischer and Richard Horn, *Guest Editors*

Although the technical ability of an EPSS to be a seamless environment of "knowledge agents" and its workspace have been enhanced by Windows-based systems, the business rationale for funding them and the performance rationale for engineering them have not matured. Over time, this is where the biggest growth of EPSS should occur. But without tools that are primarily EPSS tools and with no clear methodology for building them or measuring their performance, EPSS will be limited to "an approach." Although a common vocabulary would help (it is worth noting that people often want to change the name EPSS after they "get it"), as would tool vendors that brand their products as EPSS tools, we believe EPSS will achieve greater significance when no longer funded out of the training line item of departmental budgets but instead funded out of performance systems.

While many of the early spokespeople for the EPSS initiative continue to support its growth, leaders are needed who can simplify, quantify, and demystify the EPSS "black art." Looking at EPSS as an art form or spending inordinate time and money on workshops that develop the healthy working relationships required of an EPSS team scares business managers who want predictable outcomes before they fund EPSS programs, which can cost two or three times the expense of just doing training.

The articles in this special section are as diverse as the topics we alluded to in this introduction: vocabulary, return on investment, methodology, performance, training, and project management. IBM's John Karat describes his view of EPSS research from the neighboring field of user-centered design. The critical business issue of return on investment is examined by members of the Canadian Research Institute of Montreal, who present results based on working with a large utility company with demanding performance requirements. The article by Cole, Fischer, and Saltzman is at the junction of this special section, offering learnings both theoretical and applied. Gloria Gery provides insight into the nature of EPSS in the form of a manager's interaction with a genie. In "Preparing for EPSS Projects," Shelia Benko and Shelley Webster provide practical advice on the particulars of project staffing.

The aim of this special section is not to be the definitive word on EPSS—the concept of EPSS is simply too encompassing for that. We hope readers will be excited about the new horizons EPSS can open, and that some readers will see their own work in a new light. C

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