Is the 9370 a threat to the 4300? How can users protect themselves from vendors' misrepresentations? Will there be a revolution in the DP center?

Dr. George Schussel, respected lecturer on new developments in software, answers these questions for contributing author John Kador. Dr. Schussel is well-known for his knowledge of database management, for helping users make objective comparisons among 4GL products and for keeping them abreast of changes in the software field. Dr. Schussel was graduated with his doctoral degree from Harvard Business School. He is president of Digital Consulting, Inc. based in Andover, MA.

Question: *In broad terms, what do you see as the future of the IBM 4300 Series?*

Dr. Schussel: The 4300 really represents a technology that was introduced many years ago and is probably nearing the end of its life cycle. Its replacement is the IBM 9370 series. In terms of performance, the top end of the 9370 series is well in the neighborhood of the 4300.

Q: *What sort of feedback have you been getting on 9370s?*

Random Thoughts From Dr. George Schussel—

an interview with the president of Digital Consulting, Inc.

A: We've been told by software developers that the low-end 9370 systems are exceedingly slow. We'll probably see, like with 4300s, some iterations and some new product announcements for running them outside the computer room. That's a big advantage. But if the units don't have power in the mid-range, then 4300s will still continue to be popular. Eventually, however, I expect 9370s will expand and

really replace the function of 4300s all the way from something a little larger than a desktop computer up to the mainframe range.

Q: *Which operating system will predominate for 9370s?*

A: IBM is selling 9370s as VM/CMS machines. That makes sense from IBM's point of view because, for the customers targeted for these units (especially if they are evaluating Digital Equipment Corporation VAX VMS units), VM/CMS is the most comparable operating system that IBM has. VM/CMS is also the friendliest operating system that IBM has and it can run other systems as hosts. That makes sense, especially for development environments.

People who use IBM computers know that DOS/VSE or MVS are much more efficient operating environments than VM. So the question I really have is whether VM can be modified to make reasonable sense as a production operating system, rather than for the Information Center. It may very well be that people will run various versions of VSE under VM for production and then CMS under VM for development. That may be a reasonable solution. *Continued* ▶

Q: *One impact of the 9370 announcement was that Canaan Computer Corporation, a manufacturer of a CMS-look-alike for the mid-range market, went out of business. Do you see any implications for the mid-range processing market?*

A: No, I don't think Canaan was a significant enough force in the market. The road is littered with companies who have made IBM-compatible boxes and have fallen by the wayside. After all, the manufacture of IBM plug-compatible computers has gone on since the days of the System/360. Some very fine companies like RCA have been in that business and dropped out along the way. It has never been viewed as the most stable long-term business. There have been very few companies that have been able to make it over the long term. I guess Amdahl has created as successful a record as any company.

Q: *You generously use the term "marketing-relational" to describe database management systems whose claim to being relational can only be supported by referring to the marketing literature. How can customers protect themselves from the misleading claims of the software vendors?*

A: It is one of my continuing disappointments that vendors uniformly and consistently misrepresent, even lie, about the capabilities of their products. I can't point my finger at anyone because so many vendors do that. The buyer needs to be aware of the situation and basically listen with a grain of salt. You can always go to independent observers like ours to get advice. Beyond that, it's essential in any buying decision to talk to other users of the product.

Q: *On a scale of one to ten, rate the credibility of these items that a potential buyer may use to make a decision. Let's start with vendor marketing literature.*

A: It varies so dramatically from vendor to vendor. I feel that marketing literature that talks about "enormous performance enhancement" or "better information integration" conveys no meaning whatsoever. But you will see other literature that even at a summary level is functional and specific. I find such information useful at about a six, on a scale of ten.

Q: *How about an in-depth product demonstration?*

A: Product demonstrations have benefit to me at about a three. They give the illusion of demonstrating product capability, but they don't really tell you anything about it. On the other hand, if the product demonstration is your application, that is much more useful. But I would give little credence to a canned demo.

Q: *A visit to a friendly reference site?*

A: Visiting an existing user of a product is an eight or a nine. The hospitality in reference situations will continually amaze people. I always tell potential purchasers that they will be literally astounded at how friendly reference situations are. At a minimum, it's necessary to develop an intelligent list of questions, talk to three to six other users of the product and verify the answers.

Q: *How valuable are user groups to potential purchasers?*

A: They are extremely useful in allowing you to talk with large numbers of users in a very short period. Incidentally, many vendors will not allow prospects to attend their user groups. That's a pretty standard policy. But if you press hard enough, you

can often get that policy waived.

Q: A software benchmark?

A: Where you bring it in and try the product yourself? That's a nine. The bottom line is don't make an irreversible commitment to buy before you bring the product in, use it to build a prototype and gain some familiarity with it. With all these things, you can minimize any exposure that you have to misrepresentation.

Q: Do you have strategies to minimize user resistance to new technologies?

A: When you bring a new technology in, it threatens the skill-bases that people have in existing technologies. Beyond that, even at the unconscious level, if you know how to work with this tool and someone brings in another tool, it's a normal human response to avoid the learning process. The best solution is not to force the solution. Instead, pick a project and suggest its use, handpick one or two leaders to use the technology and build a prototype of a small application that will have demonstrable benefit. Then go back and evaluate the actual benefits and encourage the story to be told. Through informal channels, the story will get out and the resistance to the new product will wane. In some cases, a major conversion effort will force turnover. That's a risk or opportunity you have to take.

Q: You predict that by 1992, most of the computing in the United States will occur on small computers, leaving the mainframes to handle data storage. What does that mean to the centralized MIS function?

A: It means that MIS must be totally different than it was 10 years ago. We're talking revolution, not evolution. The management of DP, in order to manage the transition from a third generation to a fourth generation environment, has to redefine its job. In some cases, as we have seen, it means that people will get rid of a 4300 and replace it with eight PC ATs and lay off five programmer/analysts. That may be an extreme but not necessarily an unreasonable example of how to cope. The old way was a centralized DP function doing all the work. The new way is the centralized DP function creating and managing databases and, like a utility, providing access to those databases. The new way is the centralized DP department providing standards, advice and supervision.

Q: Do you see the role of the Chief Information Officer (CIO) as a viable one in the 1990s?

A: Yes, and I'm glad to see it so. When I was the chief DP officer of a large insurance company in the 1970s, that role was never viewed as, say, one of the top five executives in the corporation. Now there are enough companies such as AMR Corporation (American Airlines) in which the chairman is the DP guy. Moreover, AMR runs an airline on a break-even level and makes money on the DP function. The way companies like United Airlines, Federal Express or Fidelity Investments differentiate their capabilities is really by using computers to provide a level of service that they could not provide otherwise. Now it becomes clear that the future and rationale for being in business for such companies may, in fact, be their DP systems. This view is not revolutionary anymore, but it does mean that whoever is planning the information systems better be one of the five key people in the company or we'll probably have a competitor who's going to beat us. I think it's long overdue and I'm glad to see it. ❏