Table of Contents

Ron Schoenau: 35th Year Reflection .................................................................3
Ron Schoenau became NERDC Director in 1974

Ron Schoenau: 35th Year Reflection

At the October 1997 meeting of the NERDC Policy Board, Ron Schoenau was presented with a diamond pin to honor 35 years of service to the University of Florida. For 23 of those years, as NERDC Director, Schoenau has guided the data center through waves of technological change to serve a diverse and constantly-expanding computing community. In this interview for /Update, he recalls his career path, and comments on the state of the information technology revolution.

Schoenau got his start in educational computing in 1957, when he was a student at St. Petersburg Junior College. He applied to the Pinellas County School Board for a summer job, and was hired to operate a test-scoring machine and punched card equipment. The test-scoring device, Schoenau recalled, used electrodes to measure conductivity to determine which answers were marked on a test sheet (the "output" appeared on a volt meter, and the operator handwrote the results). On the punched card side, Schoenau used his statistics knowledge to run item analyses and other reports. That fall, he transferred to the University of Florida to complete his undergraduate degree in mathematics. When he got to UF, John V. McQuitty, University Examiner at the time, hired him part time to do similar work and to administer tests. Schoenau picks up the story two years later:

Schoenau: After graduating from UF, I enrolled directly in a Masters' psychology program. By 1960 I was ready to take a year off. I thought about becoming an actuary. I interviewed with Prudential, passed the physical, and got a job offer. But I turned it down for a job teaching math in Duval County. My students were 10th- through 12th-graders. I taught algebra, geometry, trig, intro to calculus, and even subbed for a German teacher for a while. But I kept my hand in at the University, helping administer college board and graduate student tests on weekends.
After a year of teaching I continued courses for my Masters. My area was testing and measurement -- what they called "psychometrics."

Thirty-nine credits into my program, I was recommended for a job in the data-processing section of the UF Office of the University Registrar (O.U.R.). My title was Tabulating Machine Operator IV, with a yearly salary of $4,800. In the following years I had other titles at O.U.R.: Operations Manager, Computer Programmer, Systems Analyst, Computer Systems & Programming Manager, and Director of University Computing Systems.

At one point, my salary was raised to $8,500 a year; I thought that was all the money anyone would ever need, so we bought our first house.

/Update: What led to your promotions to associate director and then director at NERDC?

Schoenau: When the UF Computing Center became the Northeast Regional Data Center in 1972, I was named an associate director. UF VP for Academic affairs at the time was Harold Hansen, a well-known physicist who has since been provost at two universities. We got to know one another traveling to various academic computing conferences in Florida. He disliked driving, and invited me to attend and drive. At times he'd sit in the passenger seat and punch out equations on what at the time was a $400 dollar Hewlett-Packard scientific calculator. When the solutions came up he would chuckle with pleasure at what he could do with that pocket instrument. Hansen was fascinated with computing.

Our director, Dr. Charles Shaffer, decided after a couple of years that he wanted to return to academics, so the director's chair came open. Hansen offered me the position. In those days there was less bureaucracy, and no national search was conducted. You could say I was in the right place at the right time.

To tell the truth, I wasn't hot on the idea at first, but I warmed up to it. In retrospect, I'd say it took me two to three years to really be qualified for the position. There was no job description. I simply had some business cards printed that said "NERDC Director" and set to work. The pay was somewhere in the high teens. It wasn't until a few years later that Hansen came to me and said I was still listed on the University's rolls as Associate Director, so that was changed, and I got a job description.

In 1974 I also threw away the trunkful of material I had collected for my thesis. The real reason I didn't get an advanced degree was not time constraints of my position, but my passion for tournament bridge. I played every free moment. When I was 26 years old, in 1963, I was the youngest Life Master in Florida.

/Update: What major computing issues do you see us facing the next ten years?

Schoenau: My view of computing is something like Andy Rooney's: "Computers make it easier to do a lot of things, but most things computers make it easier to do, don't need to be done." In my days at the Registrar's office we had a list of (programs and reports) we were scheduled to run each week on the computer. The list kept getting longer and longer, and shelves were filled with unread, unused statistics about our students. All departments generate huge amounts of data. Most people kid themselves that this data is information.

Further, if we don't handle it (the information technology revolution) right it is going to burn us. Instead of a boon to civilization, we face a loss of privacy and attendant loss of freedom. To date, in my view, if you total the pluses and minuses across the quality-of-life spectrum I think it's pretty much a wash. If I couldn't choose a wash, then I would have to say that quality
of life overall is somewhat worse.

_Update:_ What is your management philosophy?

_Schoenau:_ Hire the best people you can find, give them as much responsibility as they can handle, then stay out of the way and let them do what they know best. Mostly, I just watch other people make good things happen! It seems to work. You can go to management meetings and hear people moan about employee turnover -- but we have one of the lowest turnover rates in the State University System. A lot of the credit goes to our fine administrative staff, who make this a really nice place to work.

**Your Comments are Welcome**

We welcome your comments and suggestions on this and all UFIT documentation. Please send your comments to:

**UF Information Technology**

**UFIT**
2046 NE Waldo Rd, Suite 2100
Gainesville Florida 32609-8942
(352) 392.2061
<editor@cns.ufl.edu>