

## The Voice of OR

Part of the OR Society's mission statement is that the Society "effectively promotes the use of OR"; and this is something we do extensively through our publications, our events, our training, our OR in schools initiative, our web sites and elsewhere. But despite this activity we do seem to suffer from low public profile by comparison with some other professions. For example, I struggle to remember the last time I came across the phrase, "a leading Operational Research Analyst was quoted as saying...", whether in a newspaper or on broadcast media. But raising the media profile of OR is not an easy task. And first we need to be clear about the issues on which we would expect an OR spokesperson to be consulted. That is, we would need OR to have a point of view about something.

One category of issue on which the OR Society has indeed expressed opinions in the past is the type of issue that directly affects OR itself such as the importance and shape of mathematics teaching in schools. This kind of issue does give us the opportunity to make the case that **mathematics teaching is important to OR** and **that OR is in turn important to the economy and Society**. A similar case can and should be made for Government support for OR MScs, particularly given the increasing skills gap and the potential impact that will have on international competitiveness. We should definitely keep expressing points of view on this type of issue and using them to explain in addition the importance of OR. But what about general issues where an OR perspective is required? **What news story would require a quote from an OR professional?** Economists find it all too easy to be consulted by the media on a wide range of issues relating to the economy, regardless of the fact that so few of them foresaw the last financial and economic crisis. But what is the equivalent for OR?

There are, of course, important issues where those of us on the inside of OR know that an OR professional could add great insight to a story. For example, on anything to do with **queuing**, whether relating to **hospital waiting times**, **transport delays** or the infamous teething problems at Heathrow Terminal 5. The problem here is educating those in the media to know that they need an OR expert when such a story crops up. And this will take time and effort.

But what about turning this around and considering the big megatrend type of issues that are being widely discussed and determining whether there is a distinctive OR angle to any of them? One, for example, where I think we should have a point of view is that of productivity. In fact, in my opinion, this is an issue where Economics can ask the question but only OR can provide an answer. And it is an issue that has come to the fore following the economic downturn. Both **Government** and **Industry** are currently grappling with the dilemma of **how to increase the productivity of both the economy as a whole and of individual enterprises**. The beauty of OR is that it not only demonstrates where there is a **productivity enhancement opportunity**, it also shows **management how to achieve that improvement**.

Other examples of potential major issue OR points of view could include: the extent to which policies or strategies fail because they fail to take account of feedback effects; or how poor (or non-existent) quantification of risk leads to over-optimistic plans, failures and value erosion. In addition, many tough management issues concern optimisation, which is certainly a topic where OR has an opinion. For example, how do I optimise my: capital structure, dividend policy, brand portfolio, trade-off between customer service and cost, allocation of spend to marketing or training activities? And OR can also provide insights on poor decision making, such as erroneous assumptions of linearity, an inability to handle probability or a failure to consider key areas of complexity. Having something to say about such issues could provide us with a way to start to engage more effectively with the media. And in my experience, the media are always looking for specific stories and interesting numbers, content that OR is well-placed to provide, through case study examples and quantification of the improvements that can be achieved by using the right approach.

And, on top of these, one of the biggest megatrends where OR definitely comes into play is that of **emerging technology**, including the world of **digital communications** and **Big Data**. I was feeling pretty good about myself in having got this far through an article without mentioning the A word. But **analytics** is still attracting media attention, and OR does I am sure have a point of view on, for example, how increasing use of continuous digital monitoring can lead to increasingly **real time optimisation of processes** or, to tie this back to a previous point, how increasing data availability can drive productivity or other talent metrics such as retention, motivation or engagement. Unfortunately, this is an area where the RSS has recently stolen a march on us with their data manifesto. But Big Data is a big topic and there is plenty of space within it for OR to occupy. For example, instead of focusing on the data we could make our subject the effective use of that data to provide insight through modelling and analysis. There is a growing tendency among software vendors to want to put advanced analytical tools in the hands of everyone, despite the fact that not all have the skills to use such tools safely. What is the right balance between wider education and the use of specialists? And what are the dangers of getting this wrong?

As you have probably guessed by now, it is definitely my point of view that OR needs to have a point of view. But it would be good to hear the views of others. And is there one particular issue we should major on (as with the RSS and their data manifesto) where we could raise a distinctive voice above the general media babble?

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