Shaiken discusses office machines

By Will Doherty

Harley Shaiken, a labor leader and technology analyst of MIT's program on Science, Technology and Society, delivered the opening remarks at the International Conference on Office Work and Technology held at the Percier House in Boston last week.

Shaiken emphasized office technology now encompasses almost every part of the economy. He joked that "a computer is capable of making more errors in twenty seconds than two people working day and night for a year," but stressed we must "develop office technology in a way to benefit those affected [directly by] it and society as a whole."

The process of designing office automation systems that are safe and reasonable is easy for humans to work with is called ergonomics.

MIT and MDC police arrest man for attack on bridge

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"Even one crime is bad," Cabral stressed, "but I remember several years ago it seemed like there were a couple every week."

The Campus Police do not have jurisdiction on Cambridge streets or on or across the Charles River bridges, according to Cabral. "There's not much we can do," he said.

"The dangerous places are at the beginning and end of the bridge, where the criminal can make an easy escape," Cabral explained. "Sometimes if we see someone getting into a car we'll take a quick drive over the bridge and back, but we can't sit and ride.

"Realistically, as long as the bridge is there, there are going to be robberies."

In her keynote address to conference participants, Elisabeth Remiari, of the Personal Office Systems Division of Apple Computer, explained that software systems now on the market do not reflect the capabilities currently available. She urged that consumers of software technology seek out ergonomic, or user-friendly, software packages.

One major theme of the conference was the participation of workers in the planning and implementation of office automation systems. Representatives from Norway and Sweden described legislation and union-management cooperation in their countries. The United States lags about five years behind Scandinavian countries in the development of a safer and more effective office environment.

According to conference participants, many people are concerned about possible health risks from office work using video-display terminals (VDT's). Headaches, eyestrain and muscle problems, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), and low-level ELF-type radiation have been linked to VDT's in the workplace. Government and labor agencies have agreed to investigate reports of skin rashes, carpal tunnel, miscarriages, and birth defects.

Michael Dukakis, Democratic candidate for the Governor of Massachusetts, expressed his support of the conference and urged the participants to vote for him in election day.

In one workshop, Claudio Ciampa, of the Politecnico de Milano in Italy, described three models -- Tayloristic, cybernetic and phenomonological models -- used in office work design. The Tayloristic model, named after Frederick Taylor, presumes that office work can be programmed by management and that office workers follow predetermined procedures. The cybernetic model says people should have feedback about their work, while the "most democratic" method is the phenomonological one. It encourages a cooperative, worker-designed environment.

Over the past 25 years, clerical work has replaced manufacturing employment as the base of the economy. There are 10,000 times as many computers in use today as in the early 1950's, and revenues of the computer industry may surpass those of the oil and auto industries by 1990.

The National Association of Working Women, known locally as 9 to 5, sponsored the event with support from the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

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