

ACTING RATIONALLY

A warm-up exercise in strategic thinking



THE PREDECESSOR of the modern typewriter was the *skrivekugle* (“writing ball”), developed and patented by the Danish inventor R. Malling Hansen in 1870. This device was quickly ousted, however, by the “real” typewriter, designed in 1873 by Christopher Scholes and others for the Remington company (already a market leader in rifles and sewing machines) — despite the fact that the latter worked much slower.

Among other features, Scholes designed a new layout for the typewriter keyboard, which became known as QWERTY, after the arrangement of the first six letters from the left in the top row. The principle guiding Scholes’ effort was to maximize the physical distance between keys for the letters used most frequently in the English language, with the express purpose of *slowing down* the typist! This was a good solution in its day because, unlike the “skrive-kugle,” typebars on Remington typewriters frequently jammed. (Besides, on very early models the typist could not even see the line he/she was writing, until he/she had completed it and started the next paragraph). By the turn of the century, Remington was mass-producing QWERTY typewriters, which quickly became the *de facto* industry standard.

Other keyboard layouts were always available, however. The best known is the DSK (Dvorak’s Simplified Keyboard) which, by comparison, reduces the distance that a typists’ fingers must travel by more than 50%. Apart from any reduction of physical strain, the net result of this is that the same material can be typed in 5 to 10% less time using DSK instead of QWERTY.

During the Second World War, the US Navy used DSK typewriters on a large scale, re-trained typists to use them, and found that the cost of re-training was fully recouped in approximately ten days of use. In other words, the introduction of the DSK as a national (or international) standard, would probably lead to a significant productive gain in the routine work area of typing with Latin alphabet keyboards..

If not before, the QWERTY was made irrevocably obsolete and irrational by the arrival of IBM’s typeball-machine in the nineteen-sixties — that is, at least from a mere technical point of view. Since the keyboard layout of a typewriter is literally “hard-wired,” in cast iron, it could still be argued, of course, that it would quite costly to replace all QWERTY typewriters with DSK ditto.

No such hesitations exist for modern word-processing computers, however. A small software program that adjust the PC’s settings to the DSK can be downloaded or copied as freeware, and the single keys on most PC keyboards are removable, and can be rearranged physically in approximately 10 or 15 minutes. In other words, any inertia regarding QWERTY in the rich Western world now resides with people, and not with material equipment.

Now that you know the facts, please answer the two questions overleaf:

If we give you the software, will you be prepared to start practicing the DSK system from Monday, next week? (Whether the answer is 'yes' or 'no,' please state your reasons.)

Please think of a strategy that will make your organization switch to DSK keyboard within six months. What would be the key elements of such a strategy? What resistances, if any, would meet such a proposal — and how could you overcome them?

After recording your own ideas, kindly form a small discussion group with others. Try to pool your ideas, and to agree on an overall strategy.

Source:

A. K. Dixit & B. J. Nalebuff, *Thinking Strategically*.
New York 1991: W. W. Norton & Co. ISBN 0-393-31035-3.