

## On The Management Style of Jan Nuis

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I think that, if asked, most people would use terms like “conservative,” “cautious,” or “calculated” to characterize aspects of Jan Nuis and his management style at CWI. These impressions would, no doubt, be based on Jan’s reputation for zealously guarding both the balance sheets and bank accounts of the Stichting Mathematisch Centrum and CWI from internal and external attack. Although I had initially assumed that this reputation was an inherent consequence of being the managing director of a research center of some 200 individuals — half of whom were convinced that *they* could do the job better, and the other half of whom were convinced that they wouldn’t do the job any worse — I must admit that, during my first year in Holland, the fiscal sobriety of Jan Nuis required more than a little adjustment on my part. (While specific examples escape me, I do remember the profound impact that the use of the word “mier” as an adverb had on my evolving knowledge of Dutch.)

To put my experiences in context, I should mention that one part of my jobs at CWI is to spend the money that Jan Nuis tries to keep within the safe confines of our Amro Bank account. In allocating our funds, I have always subscribed to the general principal that “the larger the order, the more interesting the deal;” that is, it is in everyone’s benefit (but primarily ours) if we place one large order instead of 10 small ones. As a result, early in my tenure, I began to submit acquisition proposals of (seemingly) alarming size. The first of these was for a new networking infrastructure for CWI, designed under the motto: “If one Ethernet is good, then three Ethernets should be great!”; next came two parallel computers, one an Alliant — which he always pronounced Alien-t, as if it came from another planet — and the other an Encore (which, although quite terrestrial, did arrive from Massachusetts via Paris and Brussels); finally, rounding out the outerspace metaphor, came 18 new workstations from Sun. (And this all in the first 10 months of 1988; in subsequent years, we revamped our central and workstation facilities in an on-going process of large scale investments.)

During this time, I and others argued, pleaded, cajoled, and contrived with vendors and manufacturers to allow our relatively modest budgets to be stretched as far as possible. This was, however, the easy part. After reaching agreement on a purchase contract, I then had to obtain internal approval from Jan to place the order in question. The first million guilders (for the network) came deceptively easily. Every penny thereafter was a struggle — even in a country where pennies haven’t been used for nearly a decade! Of course, the internal debates we had did have their positive aspects. In 1988 and 1989, for example, all equipment purchases over f 250.000 had to be submitted for external review by a panel called the CRIVA. Compared to

the discussions held in Jan Nuis's office, these CRIVA sessions were more a social event than an inquisition.

The acquisition discussions typically took the following form: I would present a proposal that outlined the type of equipment being considered and the minimum number of units we needed to buy. I would then explain that, by placing the order immediately (that is, later that hour), we could either increase the number of units or expand the configuration of each unit bought, all at an exceptional discount. I would then quickly mention that the total order was slightly more expensive than our resources at first glance would allow, but that the net effect of the purchase discount and the value of the equipment were worth the extra money. Jan would sit quietly, and then say: "If my wife came home and said we could buy a second house because it was offered at a 50% discount, I clearly wouldn't do it." Silence. After a few tense moments while all of us in the room reflected on this wisdom, I would try another approach: by buying new equipment, we could take old equipment out of service. This would improve the quality of facilities available to our researchers *and* it would reduce the net amount we had to pay for system maintenance costs. The hint of a net cost reduction provided a glimmer of hope in our discussion: after calling various internal fiscal experts for verification, we then got down to the business of signing order forms and sending FAXes.

The result of our give-and-take discussions on Jan was apparently a feeling of affinity with the new equipment that bordered on the parental. This became clear in 1990 when I decided to donate some surplus computers to two Eastern countries that had recently been taken off the "dangerous potential enemy nations" list by the US Government. In spite of a champagne send-off (and some nice press coverage), the reaction I got from Jan was less than enthusiastic. Perhaps it was the fact that one of the machines was the famous old *mcvax*. Perhaps it was a special attachment to the color blue then used by Digital on its computer cabinets. Perhaps it was the fact that Jan found out about the donation from Het Parool. Whatever the reason, I discovered that disposing of equipment was even more painful than buying it.

But, I digress. Let us return to the initial question about impressions of the management style of Jan Nuis. In the light of my many dealings during the nearly four years of my intended 18 month stay at CWI, I can summarize my impressions in a single word: *moxie*. Moxie because in nearly all of the discussions we had, we talked about buying advanced equipment that nearly no one in Europe had ever heard of, let alone ordered. Moxie because, in spite of the problems we encountered by being the first worldwide customer to receive Sun's now-successful Sparcstations and the first Dutch customer to buy an Encore multiprocessor, Jan never wavered in his belief that technical aspects of purchases should be left to technical experts. Moxie because, even though our vendor negotiations were conducted at remote locations

(such as Mountain View, California and Tokyo, Japan) or under strange circumstances (such as reaching purchase agreement when the only demonstration model of the product available in Europe was hidden under a bedsheet in a hotel room), Jan always agreed that our investment in research facilities was worth a visit to product developers instead of just a discussion with product salesmen. And moxie, because he was able to make final acquisition decision in a very short time where others would have been much more cautious and conservative.

My lasting impression, then, of Jan Nuis is that of a principled individual who, through his trust and moxie, has served as the means by which the research infrastructure that we have built over the years became a reality. While I doubt that he will have a bright future in the real estate world, I appreciate the impact he has had on our environment here. One can only hope that his successors will share his vision.