

Adventures In South America

During my twenty or so years with the Avondale division of Hewlett-Packard (HP) I served three separate stints as Research and Development Systems Manager. I had never aspired to that role; I used to say that my punishment for doing a good job was to be pushed into management. Between those stints I was subject to what I considered to be benign neglect. I was allowed to putter around and experiment on whatever captured my interest.

During one of those periods the division manager and the engineering manager dropped by my desk and asked me to take control of an existing project. After more than a year's work the project was in serious trouble. It's goal was to design and develop a new state of the art gas chromatograph. My first two answers were "No," but they were persistent.

I did some minor reorganizing and began conferring with project members. It was a group of ten very talented engineers, and I mostly kept out of their way and let them do their jobs.

For major projects the transition from R&D into manufacturing was sometimes difficult. Because this was a very complicated device, there was some concern. Corporation wide HP had just completed devising an extensive standard red tape procedure for this transition. As project manager I was responsible for implementing it. I had an intense aversion for red tape, so I followed my instincts and did an end run around it.

I had a computer system with a Basic language interpreter installed in the area where the instruments were assembled. After consulting with the people doing the assembly, I wrote a Basic language data base management program specifically for this instrument. It kept track of the status of each of the dozen or so instruments as they moved through each stage of assembly.

The people doing the assembly loved it, and they thought that I walked on water. I received zero static for dodging the red tape.

We did introduce the instrument, and it was a great success. Some time later the division manager confided in me that for a period of time it was the major revenue generator within the HP corporation.

A perquisite from the job was a trip to Sao Paulo, Brazil to assist in a week of training the South American HP sales force in the use of the instrument. English was the language for the session, but they appreciated my attempts to communicate with my high school level Spanish.

Following the training I flew to Buenos Aires, Argentina to accompany the HP sales person on some calls to customers. I had my first adventure at the airport as I turned into the wrong corridor and was escorted out by armed soldiers.

During a break in my schedule I took a tour of the beautiful city in a sightseeing bus. I first sat with a group which had an English speaking guide, but I discovered that I could understand more in the Spanish speaking guide's section.

At the Sheraton Hotel the elevator I was on hung up between the thirteenth and fourteenth floors. I had to get on the phone to tell the man down stairs about my problem. Calling upon my high school Spanish again, I was able to explain the problem to him.

The HP sales person took me to lunch and I recognized very little on the menu. He offered to select something for me, and I accepted. It was tasty, and I asked him what it was. He answered, "Ask me later." I forgot to ask, so I'll never know. Perhaps it's just as well.

On my way home I had a full day layover Rio De Janeiro. The HP sales guy for the area had promised to meet me and show me around the area. After waiting for several hours at the hotel the next morning I concluded that he wasn't coming.

I moved to an area where I could observe the outside activities of the hotel guests. A steady stream of cars was picking up guests for sight seeing trips. At the information desk I was assured that English speaking drivers were available, so I hired one.

The driver's competence in English was at the same level as mine in Portuguese. His mother tongue was Italian. We experimented to find that Spanish was our best common language. I think it turned out to be an enjoyable experience for both of us.

At one point we took a break and entered an amusement park. I ordered a cervesa (beer in Spanish) and got an ice cream cone. I enjoyed it.

That evening as I was in the boarding area of the airline terminal someone tapped me on the shoulder and pointed toward the glass wall which separated us from the rest of the terminal. It was my HP host, who was gesturing energetically. He was trying to convey to me the reason for not picking me up. I couldn't hear him, so I will never know.

As the plane took off, I knew that I would have many pleasant memories of that trip.