

In Memoriam — John Diebold — Evangelist, Pioneer, and Visionary

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You may or may not have noted the December 26, 2005 passing of John Diebold at the age of 79, but you should have. Diebold is not a member of the Computer Hall of Fame, but he should be considered the “patron saint” of the use of computers for business (i.e., information technology or IT). Future historians of the rise of the era of information technology will have a small “shelf” of critical reference works that students will be required to read. Alongside Norbert Weiner’s *Cybernetics* and Tracy Kidder’s *The Soul of a New Machine* on that virtual shelf will be found John Diebold’s *Automation*.

Published in 1952, *Automation* introduced the then-radical concept of using programmable devices, i.e., computers, for business. The book included profound, even revolutionary statements for the time that are common wisdom today. For example, “... a digital computer can be designed to perform all the accounting and bookkeeping functions of a business” and “... a digital computer can monitor the operation of an entire manufacturing plant” (p. 29). John translated technology in accordance with its ramifications for business in particular and for society in general. Automation of assembly lines, electronic records storage, and interoffice computer networks are among the concepts that he advocated. As a visionary however, John’s ideas sometimes took decades to come to fruition with some still in process (such as electronic medical records information systems).

John was also an evangelist as well as a visionary. He was able to leverage and promulgate his vision practically through his consulting group, John Diebold & Associates, which he founded in 1954; coincidentally, the same year in which General Electric introduced the first full-scale business computer system. To put this in context, IBM did not introduce the first general purpose series of computers — the transformational IBM 360 series — for another decade. Along with GE, other distinguished clients of John Diebold & Associates included AT&T, Boeing, IBM, and Xerox, the cities of Chicago and New York, and the nations of Jordan and Venezuela.

For a time, the Diebold Research Program was offered by John Diebold & Associates. Through its reports and meetings, the Program influenced what would now be called CIOs or IT executives. For those of us who were fortunate enough to know John personally as clients through the Diebold Research Program, he was a gracious host who delivered first-class service. The program greatly increased our own knowledge base, for which we owe John and his associates our heartfelt thanks.

John continued to expand his horizons. He published "Making the Future Work" in 1984 that was subtitled "Unleashing our powers of innovation for the decades ahead." John articulated a number of first principles, which are still worth reviewing today. How much influence an evangelist has is subject to debate. John was fond of quoting an ancient Chinese proverb that says the greatest leader is the one who inspires his people after a victory to believe the battle has been won by them alone. Although there is no way to prove it, I suspect that all of us in the IT industry owe John a debt of gratitude for accelerating the process of what we now call information technology by years if not more.

For any visionary, perhaps the best legacy is in knowing that you were right all along. Hey, John, you were right and thanks to you we have all benefited!

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