

Our very latest model

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For most of us the ethics of work practices are something that biologists have to worry about. After all, you don't have to cut up a dog to diagonalise a Hamiltonian. Nevertheless are conscious of very high standards in the conduct of research. For example, we present out findings (fairly) honestly, we readily accept their overthrow by others, we give freely of our time to the running of conferences and journals, and we encourage and nurture the new members of the profession.

In the matter of research proposals, which bring no prize for finishing second, there is an awkward tension between due modesty and a persuasive presentation. To survive we must draw a discreet veil over our deficiencies and offer our better profile to the world. Here there is a certain elasticity in our claims to virtue. It is understood, particularly by the reviewers.

This tendency is in danger of being stretched to breaking point by the growing use of consultants to write proposals that are elegantly tailored to the wishes of the granting body. The common wisdom is that Framework Programmes 5 and 6 are readily accessible only by this method. Certainly it is now explicit that scientific brilliance is necessary but not sufficient.

What distinguishes these programmes from their predecessors is the increasing intrusion of socio-economic criteria. Most of us,

when asked to detail the direct societal benefits of our research, fall back on stammering platitudes or Faraday's immortal defence: what use is a baby? *Nul points.*

Enter the consultant with a bulging briefcase of buzzwords. *Et voila!*

In the process of transformation from ugly scientific duckling to smooth commercial swan, it is likely that something will be lost. In a word, innocence. The system of business ethics is very different from ours. Self-promotion rather than self-denial is its stock-in-trade. Manifest dishonesty (vide recent events in the U.S.) is frowned upon, but one may float freely in the grey area of unsubstantiated and imaginative claims. That's business.

Within its proper domain this highly successful system is best left alone, but what will be the consequence of its introduction into the world of academic physics? Will our research become a pursuit of convenient half-truths, backing up the spurious novelty and usefulness of the "latest model"?

Erratum

Professor J. Indeku has brought to our attention that the Edited version of the talk delivered at the Physics Teaching Forum, [EPN vol 34/3 page 98] organised on March 16th, 2002 in Brussels by the National Committee for Physics of the Belgian Royal Academy of Sciences needs to be completed with the following text: "in collaboration with the Belgian Physical Society. This article is reproduced from the original version published in *Physica* Magazine (Belgian Physical Society), vol 24, n° 3, p.139-149 (2002)."