Imagine a large room, divided by curved polystyrene screens (whose geometry is softened by real plants, regularly watered by men in monogrammed overalls) into domains whose denizens can thus satisfy their territorial imperatives, but where an unhealthy isolationism is discouraged by multi-coloured organisation charts on the wall that tell each Crusoe that so far from being an Island, entire of itself, he (which shall be taken by Company policy to embrace at all times, she) is an essential part of a team.

The coffee-lady has come, who like Rousseau Le Douanier draws these denizens from the undergrowth into view. Among them is Alfred, the greyhaired programmer. It is not only the greyness of his hair, but its shortness, which distinguishes him. He is also wearing a jacket, full of pens. Others around him have side whiskers luxuriant as those of a Victorian railwayman, or mounds of little curls on their head, like the froth round a drain when someone has been too free with the bubble bath liquid. But Alfred has brown shoes with toe caps. He wonders why those with side whiskers do not stare or even seem to wish to stare, as he does, at the girl programmers in T-shirts without bras, and wonders further whether the reason is lack of masculinity (the more comforting) or satiety (the less comforting explanation).

He is on good terms with the others. There is no deference to his age though, nor to his experience. There could hardly be any, since it is Alfred who has to ask them for advice for example on control cards, because the operating system changes so often that a young memory is better than a long one.

Alfred's official position is easy to ascertain - it is written on the wall as clear as MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN -
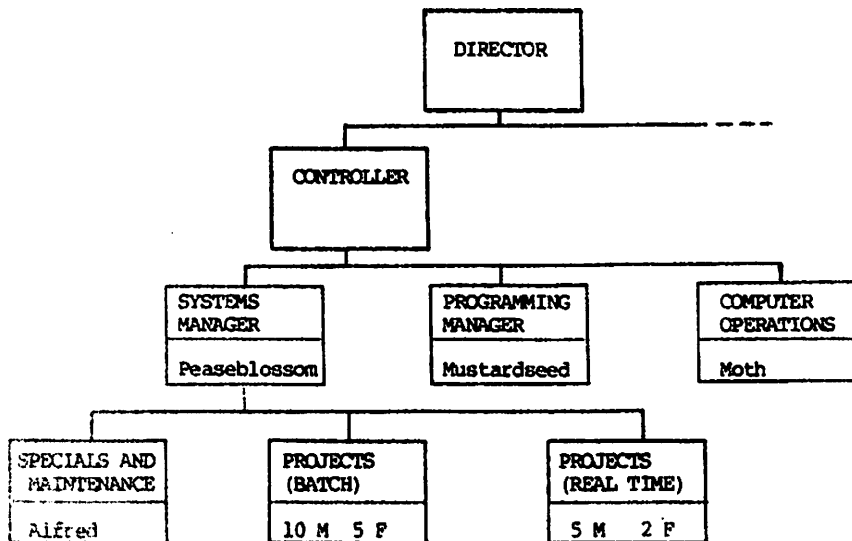
He studies this as he sips his hot coffee, then goes to wash the disposable cup (in the company's time!) to take home for picnics; returns to his place over the carpet tiles with their associations of tessellation automata and Dutch interiors. If he wears a nice bald track to his den (Private! Denizen within!) the men in monogrammed overalls would do a hair-transplant from some unfrequented, hirsute glade. Nor is Alfred's personality allowed to stamp itself on his desk, at least, not on the desk top. There are a few, sensible rules about what can and cannot be left there. But open the drawers (Alfred has his own key, and there is only one other, master key in security) and rampant individuality is seen at last.

There is of course a copy of the departmental standards manual. On top of this lies a black folder, untitled and without a reference number in the preferred format of aaxxxx and inside this is an IBM 650 program he wrote in 1959. There is a pack of lucky IBM/370 control cards, which used to work very well until they changed something. Alfred thinks they may well change back again, and holds on to the cards in case.

In the other drawers are copies of reports he has written over the years, bearing the imprimaturs of at least half a dozen different managers who have come and gone. The last drawer of all has a special lock, which Alfred fitted himself. Inside is an untitled, handwritten manual and a deck of cards. Alfred does not open this when people are about.

A Burne-Jones secretary in cheesecloth comes over. "Can you come to Bob Peaseblossom's office please, Alfred?"

Alfred sits in front of Mr. Peaseblossom, who is half his age. Mr. Peaseblossom wants Alfred's headcount to use for a real-time specialist. "How are things?" he asks. Alfred is quite used to the situation, smiles, sits tight, and waits. He does not turn down Mr. Peaseblossom's suggestions of early retirement, or the post of O and M liaison clerk at the same salary (but with zero increments for ever). Mr. Peaseblossom recollects he had the same inconclusive discussion with Alfred last week, and becomes desperate. "Alfred, I want you to write me a resignation letter by the end of the week. I'll make special arrangement with Personnel for full scale pension. Otherwise we shall announce your transfer to O and M."

A man with less experience of this sort of thing than Alfred would lose his temper, or beg for mercy. But he smiles and nods, saying neither yes nor no, and returns to his desk. It is time to unlock his special drawer. He studies the handwritten manual for some time, and lifts the phone.

"Cost Accounts? Bert Cobweb, please."

"Hallo Bert. Coming fishing again this weekend? Good.
Bert, look. I'd like you to put in an interrogation transaction.
Ninety six this time. Yes. Code ninety six followed by, say,
thirty four pounds ten pence. Fine.
Oh, and Bert, why don't you pop round for a bag of plums tonight?"

Alfred relaxes. He even starts drafting the Horticultural Society's
monthly newsletter. Then the phone rings again.

"Oh, hallo , computer room. What can I do for you?
I see.
Well, look, I can't really help.
Yes I know, but Bob Peaseblossom wants me to take over some different
responsibilities. I can't spend time on maintenance any more.
Well, you better raise it with him.
Cheers."
Back to the newsletter draft. "In the marrow section, Mrs Carter,
though half a pound lighter than last year, still gained first prize."
The phone rang again.

"Yes Bob.
Of course Bob. I'll look into it right away. About my resignation...
You want me to forget about it for the time being. Fine."

An operator arrives with a core-dump and console-log for Alfred.
He knows what's wrong before looking, of course, but from experience
he knows that it will take him about ten days to correct the fault -
long enough for the Cost Accountant to write a mild memo to Bob,
but not so long as to create real trouble. Alfred avoids trouble.

The Cost Accounting suite was written for the IBM 650 and now runs
on the IBM/370. Alfred wrote a program (in 650 SOAP) which converted
any SOAP program to IBM 1410 Autocoder. The 1410 was superseded
by a /360 with 1410 emulator, and then by a /370 without, and at
that stage a program was written which converted 1410 Autocoder into
COBOL, at the instigation of Bob Peaseblossom's predecessor but three,
in the vain hope that the Cost Accounting suite might become
intelligible to someone else besides Alfred. The COBOL version was
however unhelpful, consisting of such statements as

                ADD P13649 TO P14930 GIVING P63341

The program for converting 650 to 1410 was now also running in
COBOL on the /370.

Alfred lovingly opens the 650 program folder and turns to the obscure section which corrupts all files on receipt of ninety six transactions. He will take his time, and he will leave alone the part which does the same thing for eighty four and one hundred and three transactions. (A man must make provision for the future). But he will put the ninety six transaction right. Then the program for converting 650 to 1410, translated into COBOL, and run on the /370, will be run on the corrected suite, and the results will then be turned into COBOL and compiled for the /370.

Bob Peaseblossom is re-reading his Drucker. His priority must be to innovate: expand the real-time system. The Cost Accounting suite is part of the past. Let it and Alfred be encysted together, if this has to be. He must try to get his headcount another way - he will talk to his boss this afternoon. (As a matter of fact his boss is also thinking about headcount, and was planning to talk to Bob anyway. Would Bob like to run the company's punch card installation in Ulster?)

Alfred is not hurrying things, but he makes sure his desk is clear of Horticultural activities. He smiles through the foliage at the young people. He rather likes it here.