InfoWorld

THE PERSONAL COMPUTING WEEKLY

SNOOPY
PAGE 66

NEWS

COMPUTER THIEVES IN THE SCHOOLS
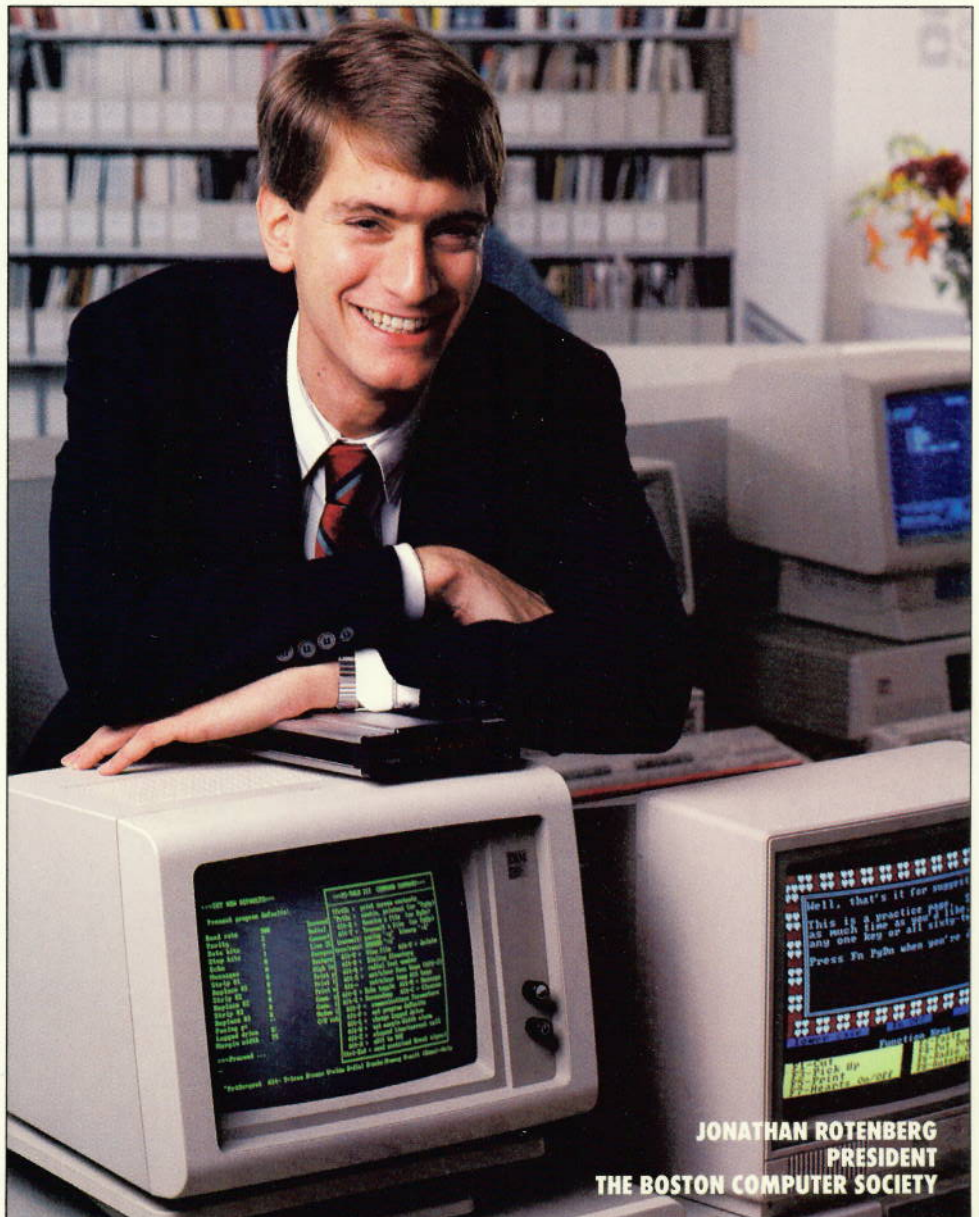
TECHNOLOGY

DIGITIZING PICTURES

THE INDUSTRY

IS TRIVIA THE ANSWER?

REVIEWS

EPSON PX-8: A BETTER MODEL 100; SIDEKICK: AN OFFICE PLUS

BOSTON GROUP COMES OF AGE

JONATHAN ROTENBERG
PRESIDENT
THE BOSTON COMPUTER SOCIETY

USERS GROUPS

GROWING PAINS IN BOSTON

The Boston Computer Society redefines itself

BY MARGUERITE ZIENTARA
Senior Writer

The phenomenal growth of the Boston Computer Society (BCS) — from profoundly informal meetings run by a 13-year-old kid in braces to a glistening machine with 12,000 moving parts — is no secret. You've seen the story in almost every computer magazine ever published, not to mention the *Wall Street Journal* and *People* magazine.

Less well-known is the story behind the story: just how Jonathan Rotenberg, now only 21, successfully nurtured the BCS throughout its (and his) adolescence and is now firmly prodding it into adulthood, all the while struggling with some members' occasional resistance.

In February 1977, the group's first monthly meeting —held at Rotenberg's high school — attracted two people, one of whom happened upon it while working late. In the beginning, everything about the BCS was as uncertain as it was casual, and the truth at any given moment was that "it could have disappeared the next month," Rotenberg says.

Despite the outlook, by October 1978 the society had 70 members. That was respectable, certainly, but Rotenberg's vision went far beyond such an intimate number and, furthermore, encompassed a wide range of consumers that was not limited to techie hobbyists.

Of the hundreds of computer clubs that were springing up around the country at that time, the BCS was the only one founded on the idea of exploring people's interaction with computers rather than a fascination with the circuits and wires within the machines, Rotenberg says. "I wanted to make computers accessible to everybody. At that time, it was very sophisticated to even own a personal computer, and there was no application software, no Visicalc; just getting Basic for your machine was difficult.

"I didn't like the idea of people feeling they were on the inside, knowing the

Jonathan Rotenberg, now only 21, successfully nurtured the Boston Computer Society throughout its (and his) adolescence as head of the organization.

jargon and alienating the rest of the world. I was very much against a sense of clubbiness or a computer clique."

But many of the early BCS members enjoyed the feeling of a homey in-group, in which they could indulge their addiction to technical details without worrying about who did or didn't understand what they were talking about. "There was a lot of internal friction then," Rotenberg says. "I wanted [the BCS] to broaden and reach out to the public, but there was enormous opposition to that."

Opposition notwithstanding, in October 1978, the BCS did reach out to the public, and the public warmly embraced it. In a single day, membership skyrocketed from 70 to 225 when the group hosted the Home/Business Computers '78 show, a forum that addressed a question many still ask: What can a person do with a personal computer?

That seven-hour show was "a very big turning point" for the group, Rotenberg says. Not only did it presage the BCS's

continuing explosive growth, but it also clearly set the tone for its singular goal of serving consumers, not just hobbyists.

Now, seven years after the internal tension that preceded the BCS's first major leap forward, the society is again suffering from similar growing pains, but on a much larger scale.

A letter Rotenberg sent to members in 1978 rings true today, except for the numbers: "With a turnout of almost 80 people at a recent meeting, we find the society at a turning point," he wrote. "With your help, the future offers many useful BCS services for novices as well as advanced hobbyists. In order to make such services run effectively, a more structured organization will be required."
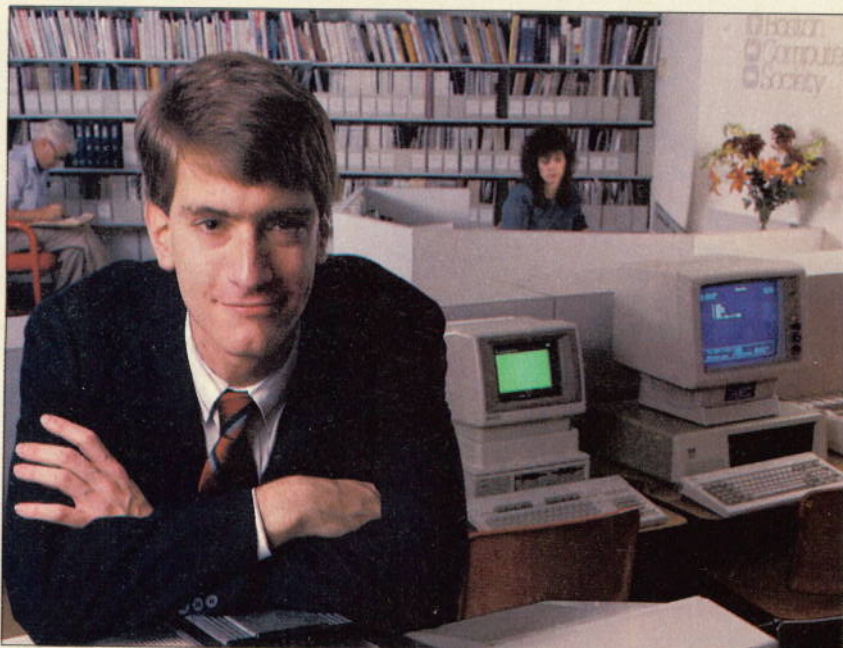
Today, the BCS has 12,000 members, 41 special interest and users groups — 15 of which publish newsletters — and its own slick, bimonthly magazine, *Computer Update*.

But, just as happened seven years ago, some members today are fighting to protect the status quo, to make sure their special interests do not become casualties of an ever more intricate infrastructure.

"Jonathan Rotenberg is not as sensitive as he should be to the group he has put together and has put it on a path that can lead to its destruction," says Mike Rohrbach, head of the 5,000-member IBM PC User Group. "We need to deepen the BCS's services to its members before we think of doubling the membership, going national, or installing a minicomputer in the main office."

It boils down to a difference in point of view, says Park Gerald, co-director of the Artificial Intelligence Special Interest Group. "It's two ends of a telescope," Gerald says. "Rotenberg has to consider all 12,000 members, and we as users group directors have to consider each

Boston Computer Society staff members, left to right, include Anne Cochran, controller; Jack Hodgson, director of member programs; Jonathan Rotenberg, president; Rosemary O'Neil; and Mary McCann, editor of Computer Update. The BCS, which was founded in 1977, has 12,000 members.

individual member, but the ideal probably lies somewhere in between."

The main office, and especially Rotenberg, "is spending too much time now trying to cajole vendors into donating equipment and not enough on improving users group member services," Rohrbach says. "All his advisers are corporate people giving him corporate advice."

Others feel corporate advice is just what the BCS needs at this point. "You have to view the BCS as a large organization," says Dan Bricklin, member of the BCS board of directors and co-founder and chairman of Software Arts. "In terms of the number of people involved, the BCS is bigger than any company in the microcomputer software industry."

It is not only that big, but it also caters to diverse interests, with each of its 41 special interest and users groups narrowly focused on a single machine or topic.

"One of the fears of growth is the loss of personal service," Rotenberg says. "But I feel that because the BCS is capable of spawning subgroups, we can address individuals' needs infinitely more directly than when we were small." For example, a scientist who uses an IBM PC can choose to go to the science subgroup of the PC User Group. Even subgroups have subgroups, in many

cases. There is a danger in specialization, too. "Some members are fanatic about their own area of interest only, and therefore may be diametrically opposed to other groups," Bricklin says. "The BCS has done a pretty good job of keeping a balance between specific interests and the general interest. That makes it very special."

No matter how single-minded any one users group may be about its own area of interest, there is no question of breaking off and leaving the nest. "Some people in the group feel we could do just as well outside the BCS," Rohrbach says, "but I know the financial issues very, very well. There's absolutely no way we could do

what we're doing if we were on our own."

The central office of the BCS can do many things for individual users groups that would be difficult for them to do themselves, including promoting the groups through its various publications, phone services, and bulletin boards; acquiring free exhibit space at computer shows; and managing membership renewals and mailing lists. It also provides access to the BCS's 20 on-site personal computers by group leaders and guests; expertise in advertising, publishing, publicity, and management; and a sort of undefinable economy of scale in getting help from vendors and industry leaders.

Each users group plans and holds its own monthly meeting, and the umbrella group plans another monthly meeting for the general membership. Topics of the general meetings are meant to be of interest to all members, regardless of their group affiliations.

It is at the general meetings that the BCS has hosted the public debuts of many new microcomputer products, including Coleco's Adam, Apple's Lisa and Macintosh, the Timex 2000, the IBM Portable, and the historic Visicalc.

"The clout we have now never ceases to amaze me," Rotenberg says. "I started to
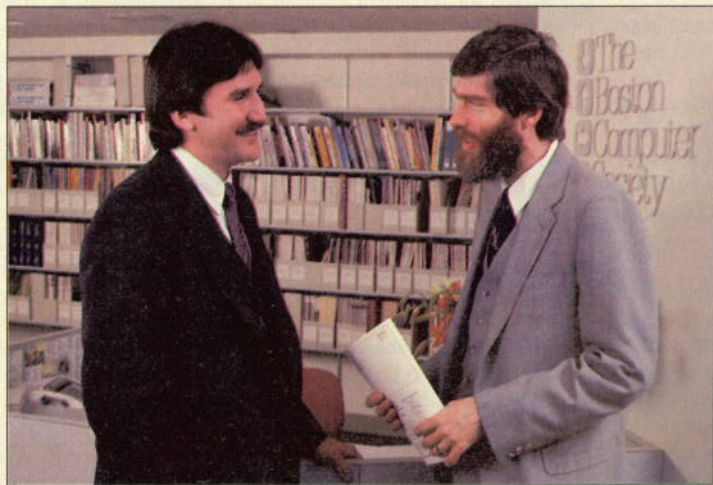
Bob Voke (left) heads the artificial intelligence special interest group. John Sturm (right) is director of the BCS consultants and entrepreneurs group.

PHOTOS BY DAN WALSH

see presidents of multimillion-dollar companies in fear that they'd make a mistake at a BCS meeting."

The guest speakers themselves have risen in stature. "We used to have computer store salesmen come to speak, then directors of marketing, then vice presidents, and now it's nothing less than the presidents of the biggest companies," Rotenberg says. "After a while, they started approaching us with requests to speak, instead of our having to invite them."

While the current users group support from BCS headquarters is already considerable, expansion is in the air. For example, the BCS has recently accepted a donation from Western Union, of a reported $2 million, that will give every BCS member a personal account on the Western Union Easylink electronic mail service, along with a $20 usage credit. The BCS plans to establish several electronic bulletin boards to which members will have unlimited free access through Easylink.

While acknowledging that Easylink, contrary to its name, is one of the most difficult electronic services to use, Rotenberg stresses members are under no obligation to use the service or to buy anything. Western Union has also arranged for BCS member discounts on communications software, modems, and lap computers.

Scheduled to appear in November is the first *BCS Computer, Software & Services Buying Guide*, a listing of 10 percent to 15 percent discounts from computer dealers and mail order companies in the six New England states, available only to BCS members. The *Guide* will be published twice a year.

The *Guide* also offers discounts from bookstores, car rental companies (Hertz only), consultants, education and training groups, expositions, computer furniture firms, job placement groups, legal counsel, magazines, computer rental firms, computer repair outfits, software support suppliers, used-computer dealers, supplies and forms providers, and computer typesetters.

Rotenberg hopes to be able to offer other product discounts to members in the future, while at the same time refusing to endorse any specific product. "It's crucial that we maintain a high level of integrity and impartiality." Another ambitious plan is to "acquire the most sophisticated computerized typesetting equipment there is" for the main office, Rotenberg says, so it can offer comprehensive publishing services to its users groups.

Amid this frenzy of activity, the BCS seems to have reached some sort of majority — just about the time Rotenberg himself has turned 21, graduated from college, and gone from part-time leader to its full-time, unsalaried president.

Faced with the behemoth the BCS has become, Rotenberg must look inward and

---

THE BCS REACHES OUT

The Boston Computer Society (BCS) wants to put the emphasis on *Boston* with a plan to reach out to the community and introduce personal computers to those who would ordinarily have no reason to find out about them.

Among those it hopes to reach are the elderly, minorities, the economically disadvantaged, and the handicapped. To attain such goals, the BCS is launching several new programs.

Perhaps the most ambitious is the Computer Discovery Center, modeled somewhat on a science museum, which BCS president Jonathan Rotenberg envisions as a "fun, exciting, public learning center."

The center will be located within the independent Computer Museum, scheduled to open in early November on Boston's waterfront. The BCS expects to have working exhibits in another year, at the earliest. "People learn so much more when they're doing something instead of being passive observers of information," Rotenberg says. "We'll shock and provoke people with very radical ideas."

The center is intended to educate the public about applications, new technologies, and the social impact of computers. As people stroll through the exhibits, Rotenberg says, "one minute they'll see something wonderful about computers and the next minute they'll see something horrible and evil." It will be up to the observer to reconcile the two extremes, and to do that each will have to "reach deeper inside himself or herself for understanding," he says.

Also planned is a penthouse Computer Cafe and, for BCS members, a relocated BCS library. The center also plans to offer workshops, seminars, and courses to teach the general public about using computers and software.

Another BCS project designed to envelop Boston is the group's Community Outreach program. "We want to play a leadership role at a very grass roots level," Rotenberg says, "to equalize the gap between


Robert Brown leads the BCS outreach program.

computer literates and illiterates."

The group is currently organizing a Greater Boston Outreach Committee, comprising representatives of large companies and community action groups. "All those groups will need technical advice and resources, which the BCS can provide through its 12,000 members," says Robert Brown, who is heading the BCS Outreach effort.

One of the first projects the group will tackle is an attempt to encourage better use of the Boston school system's 2,000 personal computers, which, "to say the least, are currently underutilized," Brown says. The BCS would like to see them used during non-school hours by the general public, guided by BCS volunteers. Other possible projects would have volunteers visit the elderly in nursing homes to show them what they can do with personal computers. In general, the plan is to "set up a means to share knowledge with those people who wouldn't normally be involved in computers," Brown says.

Within the BCS itself, one of the new groups now being started is for handicapped and special-needs users. "We want to be very careful not to segregate these people into a little group," says Jack Hodgson, the group's director of member programs. "But we do want to give them an entry point to personal computers."
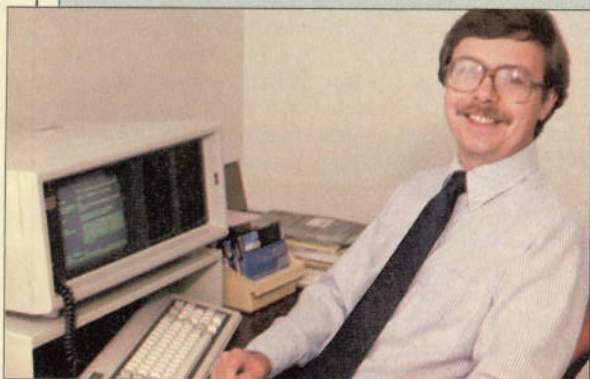
Jack Hodgson, director of member programs, says the BCS provides "an entry point to personal computers."

PHOTOS BY DAN WALSH

outward for ways to keep it manageable. Always with an eye toward testing frontiers, he sees the BCS in a perfect position to reach out even more broadly to the general public with information and invitations to the world of personal computing. (See sidebar on page 31.)

At the same time, he is working to revamp the internal structure of the fairly unwieldy organization to try to make it more efficient and more responsive to members' needs.

To get all the users groups to work toward the common good instead of their own narrow interests, the BCS has established a Member Services Council, designed to involve volunteers in decision making and in coordinating the services offered to BCS members. "The BCS was well-designed for a 3,000- or 5,000-member organization, but by the time it got to 10,000 members it was not responsive enough," says Peter Rousmaniere, a board member who is an expert in the organizational structure of non-profit institutions. "The accounting was lousy, there were no membership cards, and the board was not producing very much because its design was too primitive."

The Member Services Council is meant to eliminate the tendency of the board of directors to make decisions from afar and has given members and users group directors a feeling of "more control over their destiny," says Tracy Licklider, vice president of the board of directors and executive vice president of Software Arts. "You just can't run a 12,000-member organization with as many services and activities as the BCS has with just a small, concentrated board."

Within the council, 11 subcommittees have been formed to address issues such as improving users group newsletters; improving communication among groups and members, including the possible use of telecommunications technology; planning intergroup projects; finding ways to reward volunteers; legal and ethical issues, including copyright, conflicts of interest, software piracy, and certification and decertification of groups; and investigating the eventual expansion of the BCS to a national level.

Essentially, the Member Services Council offers a way to shift control from the very centralized board of directors downward and outward to the membership itself. Rotenberg admits some board members have expressed anxiety that unscreened, unselected volunteers "will do something horrible," but no one interviewed expressed any such fears.

"There's always tension in an organization between having someone at a central point making policy and at the same time having others throughout making policy," says John Sturm, director of the consul-

tants and entrepreneurs group. "All organizations will have that."

In addition to shifting some control to the membership, the BCS also plans to expand its board of directors from eight members to around 15. "The BCS has made an implicit decision to bring onto the board people with special talents in certain management areas," Rousmaniere says.

Many of Rousmaniere's ideas have been incorporated into the new structure of the BCS. The "tub theory," which he says he took "wholesale from Harvard University," calls for each entity of a large organization to be independent and entre-preneurial, while relying on the umbrella group for fiduciary control.

That means the BCS board would be required to protect the tax-exempt status of the organization and make sure all the individual users groups get their fair share of resources. Simultaneously, the users groups will be encouraged to raise their own money, which they will be able to use as they see fit.

In answer to fears and complaints about the new directions, Rotenberg invites everyone in the BCS to get as involved in the subcommittee policy making as he cares to. "We're moving toward bringing people together again."

Behind the internal tensions of fast growth and conflicting interests, though, the fact is that the Boston Computer Society has become a major force in personal computing generally and in the experiences of its members specifically. And most people attribute that accomplishment largely to the unique talents of its founder.

The BCS's income, for example, flows solely from each member's $24 annual membership fee, with a few donations trickling in, here and there. "People are blown away by how lean an organization we run," Rotenberg says. "The fact is, the group *looks* wealthy, but it's all done with mirrors."

"Never pay anyone (even a token amount)," Rotenberg wrote in his 1982 *User Group Manual,* a witty and revealing document he compiled to help the society's users group directors keep their organizations interesting and healthy. Most of the time, "payment is an un-necessary expenditure," the manual adds. That is the motto by which the BCS lives.

That is not to say the BCS occupies space rent-free or that it never pays for anything. But the fact is that Rotenberg is a brilliant negotiator who won't take no for an answer. In the case of the BCS office, for example, Rotenberg managed to get $250,000 worth of architectural design paid for by the landlords, which trans-formed the totally unusable "scumville" of a former pub into an elegant, subdued, and spacious office in which anyone would be

happy to spend long days.

In fact, the negotiations with the BCS's landlords have added to the various leg-ends surrounding Rotenberg's manage-ment of the group. The rent the BCS pays for the office is less than half of what it should be. "In Boston, you couldn't get a rundown building for what we're paying," Rotenberg says.

When negotiations stalled over how much space was usable, the lanky Roten-berg posed for photographs with his head touching the ceiling in out-of-the-way corners. In a dramatic moment during one meeting, he threw the photos down on the table, insisted that much of the space was suitable only for storage, and demanded further concessions. "They were shocked that I had the nerve to ask for more, after they had already given us so much," he says, "but it worked."

Besides artfully negotiating with out-side groups for benefits to the BCS, Rotenberg has a gift for getting BCS members to do things for the group. He shares some of his secrets in the *User Group Manual.* "Make people feel good about themselves and happy to be in-volved," the manual advises. "Be positive. One common mistake that users group directors make is to be bitter about all the work they have to do because no one is helping them. You may feel bitter, but just don't let it show.

"Ease people in. Everyone we know of who has ever become involved . . . in a substantial way never actually *intended* to make a major commitment to the organi-zation. They thought they were just committing themselves to a couple hours of work a month."

Rotenberg also advises users group directors to hold people to their commit-ments, to be supportive, give out lots of titles, build up a group spirit, and have everyone work on getting volunteers. If someone who volunteers for work turns out to be destructive to the group or just plain uncooperative, "Drop him like a hot potato!" the manual exhorts.

That advice exemplifies Rotenberg's outlook, which is that everything should be done for the good of the group as a whole. He is a perfectionist whose attention to detail rivals that of a microchip engineer.

He has spent hundreds of hours in the last seven years simply envisioning every detail of every upcoming event so that all potential problems would be solved in advance. "I tried to make it a really nice experience for everyone."

Rotenberg's general attitude is to keep working at something until he gets it right. "Things are never cast in concrete," he says. "I listen to people's needs and I'm flexible. Finally, we'll have an organization that does all it needs to do. Part of my job is to help people keep the faith." □