

THE SPRING RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

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INVESTMENT AND INTEREST

by

A. J. Manning

B.A., F.L.A., A.I.Inf.Sc.

Report No. 200

(April 1972)

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SUMMARY

The report summarises the functions of co-operative research, outlines some of the achievements of The Spring Research Association and suggests means whereby the members can obtain fullest possible benefit from the work and facilities of the Association.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The publication of Research Report No. 200, coinciding with the Association's move to new and larger premises, provides a good opportunity to assess the worth, to our members, of previous reports, and the research work represented in them. What use have readers made of the reports so far issued? Has the information published in this way been utilised by your company? If it has not, does the fault lie with the Association, in pursuing false lines of enquiry, or in presenting the facts in an unacceptable form? Or is the fault your own, in that the work has been ignored, or thought irrelevant to the work of your company?

In either event, what can the Association do to ensure that it is serving members as it should be?

An underlying theme of the recent work of the Association has been membership participation, establishing closer links between members and Headquarters, so that the work being done reflects the needs of industry. The Research Director, addressing Redditch springmakers, made the following declaration: "Research is often regarded in the same way as culture and the arts, as a nice luxury, but something separated from the real world of manufacture and commerce. This is

not my idea of research; research is the tool for changing technology; it is an economic activity, and the reason for undertaking research is to improve one's product or to achieve economies in its production. This philosophy is reflected in the objective of The Spring Research Association which is 'To improve the performance of springs and the profitability of the spring industry by providing a technical service, both collectively and individually, to its members'".

2. CO-OPERATIVE RESEARCH

The main purposes and advantages of the Research Association system have been summarised by F. N. Woodward ⁽¹⁾ as follows:-

- "1. To encourage co-operation in research and development between individual members of an industry, and to make the industry research conscious.
2. To investigate problems of interest to a major sector of an industry which cannot conveniently or economically be undertaken by any single member.
3. To transmit new research ideas and technological 'know-how' from a variety of sources to the supporting industry.
4. To stimulate and assist small and medium sized firms and other organisations without research facilities of their own.
5. To save money and economise in the use of scientific manpower".

It is within this framework that the Association has, for the past 25 years, been working. The pertinent questions, posed by R. Salter Bache ⁽²⁾, are "Has it been worth it? Is it still worthwhile? Does it pay off?"

These questions must be answered by every member, because none of us can afford to spend money which does not bring a return".

Salter Bache goes on to say that "anyone who says that the Research Association does not do anything for them is either

- a) ignorant of what the Research Association does
- b) incapable of making use of the information and facilities of the Association or
- c) does not understand the results which are presented".

And yet there is a danger in attempting to evaluate the worth of a Research Association, in that members are not all clear about what the RA can do; there are different expectations by different levels of staff, differences between "the person who pays the subscription and who may expect large and vivid results, and the user who judges quality at the more mundane level of everyday member-services" (3).

In addition to the obvious reasons for membership, some companies are influenced by the fact that co-operative research is likely to benefit the industry in general, whilst, in such a highly competitive industry, the danger of being left behind when some major breakthrough is achieved, must also be a factor to be considered.

3. ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE SRA

The positive achievements of the Association are catalogued in the pages of research reports, journals and annual reports. In the past few years the Association has been trying to change the pattern of research, in an attempt to get away from the 'ivory tower' image,

by concentrating more on the practical applications of such research, in order to assist spring making members at shop floor level. In addition the technical enquiry service has been publicised more, so that Headquarters can become more involved with the individual basic problems facing members.

In pursuance of these aims, the Association has produced a number of prototype machines for the shop floor; these have subsequently either been developed on a commercial basis under licence to SRA, or members have themselves built machines using the drawings and experience provided by Headquarters. As a further practical aid evaluations have been carried out on spring making equipment and accessories, to enable members, and indeed manufacturers, to benefit from an unbiased appraisal; part of the research budget has been set aside to allow such evaluation to proceed as and when new equipment comes on to the market.

On a similar level of practical help, the Association has involved itself with problems of the implementation of metrication, and of training in the spring industry. Of great value to members is the technical enquiry service; certainly not all members make full use of this service, but that those who do, appreciate it, is reflected by the fact that so many of them keep coming back for more.

Finally, the Association represents value for money. Despite the increases in membership subscriptions agreed at the 1971 Annual Conference, membership of the Association represents an extremely sound and profitable investment, yielding a share not only in an annual £50 000 research programme, but placing at your disposal the staff, equipment and expertise of a unique research laboratory.

4. MEMBERSHIP PARTICIPATION

The main problem of co-operative research lies in getting the message across to members. As another RA has put it "membership is analogous to belonging to a public library. Some exertion is required, the books do not come to you". Reference has already been made to membership participation, and companies and their representatives are urged to take a close look at the facilities offered by the SRA and the use being made of them.

A point which perhaps should be emphasised, is the right of all Ordinary Members to participate in the actual control of the Association, by making nominations to the Council of the SRA, and its Research Committee, and, by attending the Annual Conference, exercising their voting rights at the election of the officers and committees.

Similarly, all members are encouraged to make suggestions regarding appropriate work for inclusion in the current Research Programme. Each year the programme is circulated to members in the form of a Research Report (Report Nos. 185 and 197), and comment or criticism are then invited. The methods by which the Association encourages members to involve themselves in selecting topics for inclusion in the research programme have been described elsewhere⁽⁴⁾; further action can only come from members.

A lively publishing programme is undertaken by the SRA, aimed at all levels of staff. Members can only be urged to make sure that the publications are read by those to whom the material can be of most benefit. If further copies of any material are required, these can be obtained from Headquarters; if any further explanation or additional information is required, then the staff

concerned will be happy to supply it. Contributions from members, to be considered for inclusion in "The Spring Journal" or "Information Newsletter" are always welcome.

Finally the Association provides a regular forum, by means of its Technical Meetings, Conferences and Open Days, for the discussion of topics of direct concern to the spring industry, and although these attract sizeable audiences and provide lively discussion, many companies ignore the opportunity such gatherings present for meeting colleagues and facing problems jointly, as an industry. Such general meetings are supplemented by the visits to members made by the Industrial Liaison Officer, and members are always welcome to visit the laboratories to discuss particular problems.

5. CONCLUSIONS

All the above may sound familiar; you may have read similar sentiments before; nevertheless - stop and think! Is your company making the fullest possible use of the facilities of the SRA? Is it obtaining the greatest possible return on the membership subscription invested?

On our part, we do not claim that the move to a new building is going, suddenly, to cause a sudden eruption of inventions and breakthroughs which will set the spring industry alight. It is, however, undoubtedly going to provide the staff with an atmosphere more stimulating to research, and provide much needed elbow room for pursuing the various projects. And it will certainly allow us to entertain our members, either individually or in groups, permitting us to extend direct contact with members.

And, in a few months, when the official opening of the new laboratories takes place, a further opportunity will be presented to your company to visit the Association, giving a chance to see the range of equipment available, and the type of work being carried out.

Take this opportunity to look into your own investment, in your own interest!

6. REFERENCES

- (1) F. N. Woodward. Structure of Industrial Research Associations. O.E.C.D. 1965.
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- (3) Research Associations: the Changing Pattern. Centre for the Study of Industrial Innovation. 1972.
- (4) The 1971 Research Programme - a Commentary. Spring Journal, March 1971, (102), pp. 11-15.