



# Obituary

**Russell L Ackoff**

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Tributes have been paid from around the world to Russell Ackoff who died in October 2009. It is appropriate that this journal should also mark the influence of Ackoff on OR in the UK. Ackoff had a major influence on OR in this country in a number of ways.

First he was the author or joint-author of many books, two of which from the 1960s (Ackoff and Rivett, 1963; Ackoff and Sasieni, 1968) played an important role as standard references for training of OR practitioners on short courses and of MSc programmes at a time of growth in OR education. These books provided a background to the techniques of OR. Such books were very much of their time, providing a way to solve OR problems arising in a number of different contexts by use of standard modelling procedures.

Second, Ackoff had a personal influence on one of the key lively figures in British OR, Pat Rivett, and through him influenced the development of OR education in Britain. University programmes developed in the US by Ackoff and his colleagues impressed Rivett and he sought to mimic them in programmes in Britain for training practitioners and later in university programmes that were developing in the 'new' universities of the 1960s in Britain. It is easy to see with hindsight how OR educators could be seduced by a technical approach to OR. Linear programming appeared to offer a revelation as a tool, with its promise of optimal policies and precise mathematical explanation of fundamental concepts of economics such as price and value of resources. However, Rivett and others in Britain soon realised the limitations of a purely technical approach to OR. The neglect of the personal and managerial dimension was a major defect. Simultaneously while UK OR was moving away from a technical underpinning, Ackoff was developing views of a softer

systems approach, which harmonised with expectations in OR circles in Britain. Ackoff was a regular visitor to the UK in these years and gave many presentations of these new views that touched chords. (I was privileged to hear him talk as part of the seminar programme Pat Rivett organised for MSc students in the early 1970s and, like many eager students, was impressed by this visiting *guru* figure.) It was to be in Britain that Ackoff articulated aspects of his new vision of OR, that was to have dramatic effect in the later 1970s.

A third key aspect of Ackoff's influence in Britain was the delivery of talks at the ORS Conference of 1978, and the subsequent publication of them in this journal, which illuminated his new vision and led to two papers appearing in JORS (Ackoff, 1979a,b). In these papers Ackoff was critical of the way OR had developed, and was continuing to develop, and made a plea for a new way forward. These two papers have had a far-reaching influence on OR worldwide. Although views of a US expert, they have had considerable influence on the development of a particularly 'British view' of OR.

The loss of Ackoff as a challenging voice of reason in OR will be mourned worldwide.

## References

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