

## Automation

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Nick patted his LISA fondly. It had been love at first sight. It had been only a week, but for him it felt as if he had known LISA for all his life. Nick loved all kinds of machines, but LISA was special. "LISA" was short for "Larson Industries Special Accountant", a computer designed to automate any and all accounting process.

Nick worked for a large retail chain store. Until recently, he had had to enter all kinds of reports on sales, purchase prices, rents, personnel costs, etc. manually into his old computer, run different kinds of programs and evaluate the results. It had been a lot of work, and he had had to put in lots of overtime, which had caused more than one quarrel with his wife Lisa<sup>1</sup>.

Now LISA would perform all these functions by itself, and all that was left for Nick to do was handing the print-outs to his boss and cashing in his monthly pay-check. He hoped work wouldn't become too boring.

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The first problem came up after a week. A cash register in one of the stores had somehow been disconnected from the mainframe so that all sales conducted with this particular cash register were not recorded. Nick's boss suggested to just add the figures that were still available from the cash register's back-up system manually, which was of course absolute nonsense. LISA was so sophisticated that the possibility of anything going wrong had been completely ruled out, and its programming simply did not allow for correcting anything.

Nick packed up a few toiletries and fresh underwear and moved into his office to spend all his waking hours working on solving the problem. LISA's internal control systems were so complex that they wouldn't let him interfere anywhere.

In the end, after having experimented for almost two months and hiring two more specialists, they came to the conclusion that they would have to shut down LISA completely to insert a manual-override option into its programming. After another month, they had supplemented the program, entered all data accumulated over the last few months, and the system was once again functioning smoothly.

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Nick considered taking a long vacation, when his boss came up to him and asked him, if it was possible to produce a few additional reports. LISA had all the data anyway. It would be interesting for management to have an overview of which items were bought in which store, or rather in which section., What time of the day did blue blouses sell best? And what about green socks? Maybe LISA's program could be appended to register age, sex and social background of the customer with each purchase. Then all this expensive customer research would no longer be necessary. LISA would be able to tell which product was selling best among 39-year old male taxi drivers, or which toothpaste was preferred by 72-year old female ex-secretaries.

The two specialists' contracts were extended. Nick and them spent all day long writing programs to evaluate all the data LISA provided and more programs to evaluate the evaluations. The possibilities were incredible. The company hired five more computer

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<sup>1</sup> An entirely insignificant coincidence.

specialists to keep up with programming. Nick's boss spent all his days and weekends reading the reports.

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After six months, nobody could think of any more questions to ask LISA. Two months later the company went bankrupt. The rumor went that they had precariously overspent on printer paper. They might even have survived this, but nobody had taken into consideration the soaring cost of disposing of all the waste paper.