# Operations Research—An Overview

"Ideas illuminate, while interest only befog"

#### 1:1. INTRODUCTION

The activity "Operations Research" (abbreviated as O.R.) has become increasingly important in the face of fast moving technology and increasing complexities in business and industry. This chapter starts with the historical development of Operations Research and provides an overall view of the subject. It covers some general ideas on the subject, thus providing a perspective.

#### 1:2. ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF O.R.

No science has ever been born on a specific day. Operations research is no exception. Its roots are as old as science and society. Though the roots of O.R. extend to even early 1800's. It was in 1917, when A.K. Erlang, a Danish mathematician, published his work on the problem of congestion of telephone traffic. The difficulty was that during busy periods, telephone operators were unable to handle the calls the moment they were made, resulting in delayed calls. A few years after its appearance, his work was accepted by the British Post Office as the basis for calculating circuit facilities. During the 1930's, H.C. Levinson applied scientific analysis to the problems of merchandising. His work included scientific study of customers' buying habits, response to advertising and relation of environment to the type of article sold.

The term, Operational Research, was first coined in 1940 by McClosky and Trefthen in a small town, Bowdsey, of the United Kingdom. This new science came into existence as a result of research on military operations during World War II. During the war there were strategic and tactical problems which were greatly complicated, to expect adequate solutions from individuals or specialists was unrealistic. Therefore, the military management called on scientists from various disciplines and organised them into teams to assist in solving strategic and tactical problems, i.e., to discuss, evolve and suggest ways and means to improve the execution of various military projects. By their joint efforts, experience and deliberations, they suggested certain approaches that showed remarkable progress. This new approach to systematic and scientific study of the operations of the system was called the Operations Research or Operational Research (abbreviated as O.R.).

Following the end of World War II, the success of military teams attracted the attention of industrial managers of U.K. who were seeking solutions to their complex executive type problems. It was becoming apparent that these were basically the same problems but in a different context. Thus, keeping in view the critical economic situation which required drastic increase in production efficiency. O.R. activities were diverted from military to civil government and industries. In this way O.R. began to creep into business and industry. By 1948 it had taken good hold in U.K. and was in the process of achieving the same in the United States. It was only in the early 1950's that the

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