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# Coronavirus Chronicles: Tales from the New Normal

By Peter Horner

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Harrison Schramm, a longtime and very active member of INFORMS, chaired the 2020 INFORMS Conference on Security held Feb. 9-11 in Monterey, Calif. Scott Nestler, another longtime and equally active member of INFORMS, was the chair of the 2020 INFORMS Conference on Business Analytics, originally scheduled for April 26-28 in Denver.

What a difference a few months make. The security conference was held as scheduled and in-person just before COVID-19 began its rampage throughout the United States, which as of this writing has claimed more than 100,000 lives, potentially infected millions more and shut down huge swaths of the economy, some of which are only now starting to reopen and recover. The in-person Analytics Conference, caught in the middle of the pandemic, was canceled, but that's only the beginning of the story.


Besides their dedication and volunteer work on behalf of INFORMS, their respective military backgrounds (Schramm, Navy; Nestler, Army) and their extensive corporate and teaching experience (Schramm formerly at the Naval Postgraduate School; Nestler currently at the University of Notre Dame), Schramm and Nestler are major contributors to this issue of *OR/MS Today*. So, we "thank them for their service," not only for protecting the nation during their time on active duty, but for their numerous contributions to INFORMS over the years.

In early March, Schramm, author of the popular "Five-Minute Analyst" column in *Analytix magazine*, had an idea. Given the growing pandemic, he wanted to suspend his column and instead solicit content from INFORMS members and others about their pandemic-related research and perspectives. As a result, *Analytix* magazine launched a series of rapidly published online articles collectively called "Coronavirus Chronicles." For this issue of *OR/MS Today*, we asked Schramm if he would summarize some of the *Analytix* articles for a different, *OR/MS Today* audience. He had a better idea. He reached out to a mostly new group of INFORMS members and colleagues, one of whom happened to be Scott Nestler, and asked them to contribute their "stories and perspectives" on the pandemic.

The response was immediate and impressive. Besides Nestler, others who shared their COVID-19 stories included: Sheldon Jacobson (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), Norm Reitter (CANA Advisors), Sam Savage (ProbabilityManagement.org), Anna Nagurney (University of Massachusetts Amherst), Van Gurley (Metron) and Dimitris Bertsimas (MIT). Together in this month's cover story they provide a few of the many ways INFORMS members and colleagues are responding to the crisis.

Independent of Schramm's efforts, we reached out to Nestler for a behind-the-scenes look from the [conference chair's perspective](#) on the making and remaking of the 2020 INFORMS Conference on Business Analytics, which was canceled and then quickly resurrected and rebranded within weeks as the first-ever INFORMS *Virtual Analytics Conference*. Assistant editor Kara Tucker follows with a [recap](#) of the historic event that included 13 online video presentations spanning five days. As Scott and Kara both note, several sessions of the virtual conference focused on the pandemic. Nowadays, it's the elephant in every room, even virtual ones.

Coronavirus and COVID-19, the novel disease it causes, has dominated the world's attention since the start of the year for good reason: It's a global threat to humanity that has claimed more than 350,000 lives and infected many millions more as of this writing with no end in sight. The mainstream media covers the pandemic 24-7, while the medical and scientific communities have published tens of thousands of articles on the topic. In recent months, *OR/MS Today* and *Analytix* magazine have highlighted some of the contributions of operations research and analytics

professionals and researchers to the worldwide battle against the disease. This issue continues the trend. 

From Pinar Keskinocak's "[President's Desk](#)" column to Sheldon Jacobson's "[Last Word](#)" column, the issue is full of articles related to the pandemic. The "[Advocacy in D.C.](#)" column outlines INFORMS' ongoing efforts to inform Congress of O.R.'s efforts and capabilities to address the crisis. Richard Larson's "[Viewpoint](#)" teaches a lesson in "COVID-19 Math: You, Me,  $R_0$  and Rolling Re-entry." David Quimby and Livio Mariano settle the often-discussed [biology vs. economy](#) decision, and co-authors Jian Chen, Michael C. Fu, Wenhong Zhang and Junhua Zheng present a stochastic approach to [modeling the pandemic spread](#).

Along with the human toll, the pandemic crushed the global economy, giving rise to the notion of a "new normal" way of living and working. In his column, Joseph Byrum explores the "[future of work](#)" for analytics professionals and what "strong" artificial intelligence (AI) could mean for you and your company, while co-authors Thorsten Wuest, Andrew Kusiak, Tinglong Dai and Sridhar Tayur make the case for "[AI-Inspired Digital Transformation](#)" to strengthen manufacturing and supply networks.

The latter feature raises an important question: Given the globally connected economy and related supply chains that broke down under the stress of the pandemic, will efficiency now give way to resiliency and robustness in supply chain network design? Just-in-time inventory, lean manufacturing and optimized systems operations were all pillars of an efficient manufacturing industry. Historically, operations research and analytics have been the leading drivers of efficiency. Resiliency requires building slack into the supply chain. What does that paradigm shift mean for O.R.?

In the months and years ahead, it will be interesting to see how the O.R. and greater analytics community respond to the new challenges and opportunities the "new normal" presents.



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