

# ELECTRONICS AND THE FUTURE OF THE TCS

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WIN Exports, as well as tap its listings of Canadian companies. WIN Exports helps provide a corporate memory for trade officers at posts. WIN Exports was a technological revolution for the department, but we didn't know that at the time. We just set about creating it, learning as we went. In terms of departmental processes, however, WIN Exports was evolutionary; it didn't change any existing processes, it merely automated them.

**TP:** *If WIN Exports merely automated existing processes, when did computer use start to create a change in DFAIT's processes? With COSICS?*

**Lambert:** Yes. COSICS was meant to be revolutionary. COSICS should have been the start of a wholly new foreign ministry, creating fundamental changes in the way the department operates. But COSICS had a serious problem: it was based on a fixed level of technology, and was essentially frozen in technological time. As well, COSICS used many expensively customized programs, which could not be easily upgraded.

In 1991, the department decided not to proceed to Phase II of COSICS, but instead to move onto SIGNET, an open architecture type of computer system. With an open architecture system, such as Signet, equipment and software upgrades can easily be made without dismantling the whole system.

**TP:** *What kinds of changes to the department's operating procedures do you see Signet causing?*

**Lambert:** Signet is changing the basic operating culture of the

department. It empowers junior staff and forces senior staff to manage differently. Information is democratized and controlling it as a means of power is simply no longer feasible. Take the formal message (telex) system. Messages sent by telex were completely impersonal. Who wrote the telex? A committee did. And who is responsible for it? A group. The telex system was slow, and the types of information that it could handle were limited. Graphs and spreadsheets could not be sent by telex.

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On the other hand, electronic mail, E-mail, is completely personal. Using E-mail should be like using the telephone, with the same immediacy, and a full knowledge of who wrote what. A message's author is responsible for that message. Moreover, the system enables anyone to send a message to anyone else without formal prior approvals.

**TP:** *There has been some concern about a loss of corporate memory because making decisions using Signet messages seems to leave no paper trail. What facilities does Signet have to cope with this problem?*

**Lambert:** With the heavy use of E-Mail may come the danger of losing our corporate memory. The current rate of decision making by telephone and facsimile already poses this problem. Decisions made on the telephone leave no evidence of the decision making process either. Paper telexes were always filed; the

Signet equivalent of this is CATS, the corporate automated text storage system. A copy of all significant messages should be sent (as CC) to CATS, and either the sender or the recipient can decide to do so.

**TP:** *What about accountability?*

**Lambert:** Accountability may become more difficult, and it will be up to managers to ensure that adequate systems are in place. In my view and experience, not all of the approvals previously required for messages are necessary. Managers are going to have to delegate responsibility and develop new ways of ensuring that their staff understand priorities and get the training they need to do their work properly.

Certainly, trust is going to be a more important element of the system.

Formal messages (telexes) can be sent by Signet, and divisions and posts will have organizational mailboxes for the transition period. But I want to stress that all messages sent on Signet have value, with or without a file number, whether they go to organizational mailboxes or directly to individuals. Any message that contributes to making a decision should be sent to CATS.

Indeed, the hierarchy will become flatter as Signet improves person to person communication in the department. Signet will empower line officers by pushing decision making downwards. From the client's point of view, this direct communication between officers will lead to faster response times. In a way, it will be a return to the earliest days of the Trade Service,

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