

No need to integrate? Then don't

It's common sense, we suppose. But if your marketing department hasn't talked to your production plant in Houston once in the past five years, and doesn't need to, avoid the tendency to install a Cadillac system which allows full function communications and document transfer between the two shops. We've overstated the case, perhaps. Suffice to recommend that you examine the way communications, decision making and information transfer occur now, and tailor office automation systems to enhance those which are important.

Training – the key to success

Despite the din about user-friendliness, the new technologies are not easy to learn at first. True, some people take to them like ducks to water, but many others may be intimidated by their apparent complexity. Training has become one of the major issues in office automation and its expense is often underestimated.

An issue which relates to training is motivation. Unless staff approach automation positively, the experiment will not succeed. Training usually involves both group and one-on-one sessions to familiarize staff with the system, its applications, and its features. Handholding is another crucial step. Many successful office automation projects include "roving experts" – a kind of technological uncle – who are never far away at the outset and who can pry users out of the "command jam" that all first timers experience.

They can help staff become more productive more quickly.

The need for well organized, easy-to-follow manuals goes without saying. In selecting integrated systems, ensure that they have well organized on-screen help features as well.

Evaluation

Evaluation is a critical component of the office automation plan, for it is through a continuous assessment of such factors as systems, features, usage, productivity, morale, motivation, quality of working life and other factors, that automation can successfully evolve.

Vendor selection

The hard part. Vendor selection should become, in part, an issue of corporate policy, for a number of reasons. First, the cost alone represents a significant capital investment. Second, selection of the technology itself will have important ramifications for the corporation or organization as a whole. Third, as technology increases in importance, the decision to select a vendor or a number of vendors becomes increasingly tied to the success of the enterprise as a whole. Fourth, end user departments usually do not have personnel expert enough to make the right choice. And fifth, it may be unwise to leave the choice entirely to section or branch managers, because of the need to ensure compatibility, where necessary, throughout the organization.

Some companies, fearful of the computer and office equipment company shakeouts that are occurring, will make conservative choices, sticking with mainline vendors. But many office automation experts agree that this is not always the wisest choice. Often, mainstream vendors simply do not have the most appropriate products to meet specific or anticipated needs. Many companies are discovering that even the largest vendors may not have the answer to their particular requirements and are increasingly shopping the market to find what they want.

The Canadian approach

A number of Canadian companies have developed office automation solutions which meet the concerns of companies or organizations wanting the assurance of equipment manufactured by leading suppliers, while at the same time meeting the need for versatile, flexible systems, tailored to the requirements of the user. In many cases, Canadian solutions include equipment by, or compatible with, major North American suppliers. And for specialized purposes, Canadian companies have developed operating systems and software that have become the choice of many large corporations and institutions. Often, these have been designed to fill particular office automation "niches", which have been overlooked by other suppliers.

But the key lies in the ability of these companies in office systems design. If anything, their product is *integration*, even though the various pieces of hardware used to build the system may be the products of leading hardware manufacturers. The emphasis, in system architecture and design, is on an open approach, which recognizes the need for systems to evolve and expand.



"A knowledge worker is someone who, when you pass by his office and see his feet on the desk, you can't be all that sure he's not working."

– Anonymous