The Electronic File Cabinet

Someone once said that policies, procedures and regulations are the grease of government. They are also a major administrative headache. Policy manuals, directives and procedures are constantly changing, and there is a corresponding need for sophisticated systems to ease the burden of revisions, filing, retrieval and

In a unique office automation field trial, the Canadian Department of Energy, Mines and Resources has applied new technologies to help solve the problem of quick access to about 20,000 pages of administrative manuals, circulars and internal memoranda.

The system, now in place, features a software approach, designed by Officesmiths Inc. of Ottawa, which can run on standard microcomputers. Called OfficePolicy, it allows for rapid access and retrieval of documents and information stored electronically.

At the workstation, users can perform word processing and text editing, forms processing, and personal filing, as well as linking in with the document management system. The work stations are MS/DOS personal computers which have access to the departmental information systems, corporate computer centres and outside databases.

There are three phases in the trial. The first, completed in early 1983, produced a feasibility study and implementation plan, including a prototype of the four major software components of the Officesmiths system.

In the second phase, completed by September 1983, a pilot program for the automation of administrative manuals was implemented, which allowed project management to evaluate both hardware and software, as well as user response.

The department reports a significant saving in the time required for staff to access, consult and interpret administrative documents. Officesmiths designed its software to meet the specific needs of the trial, but says it is applicable to almost any area involving the automation of policy and procedure manuals and documents.

Mr. Dan Normandeau, project director for the EMR field trial, says the pilot project "showed that the software developed for the system was entirely satisfactory and I am looking forward to evolving the system to the point where all information management systems in the department will be integrated."

This will begin in the third phase of the trial, which is being implemented during 1985.

Less Taxing?

At the Canadian Department of National Revenue, Customs and Excise, an integrated electronic office system has been developed by Bell Northern Research, a large communications research and development company and part of the Bell Canada, Northern Telecom family.

The system provides electronic messaging, advanced telephone service, conferencing, personal filing and report production for 100 workstations (48 in Toronto and 52 in Ottawa), largely in the Tax Interpretation and Special Audit sections of the department. The BNR system, known as the Integrated Services System (ISS), is designed primarily to facilitate communications.

The workstations include Displayphones for managers, and video display terminals with SL-1 telephone sets for knowledge workers and support staff. The Displayphone is a unique integrated telephone and data terminal. Connected by an SL-1 PBX switch, it can access remote host systems and permit electronic mail and messaging. The equipment combines voice, text and data in ways which allow employees to communicate with one another and get information easily. One aim of the trial was to test functions that tend to be similar in most offices, so that the systems will have the widest possible application.

At the workstations, documents can be created, transmitted, filed and retrieved. The system has dramatically improved "document productivity", the time it takes to create, route, modify and circulate text information. And since the system links voice, text and data at a single workstation, staff can discuss files on the phone, with visual information

displayed simultaneously.

A centrepiece of the field trial is the use of the system for tax interpretation. The Excise Tax act, which the department administers, is a complex body of regulations. Several thousand tax rulings have been placed on the QUIC/LAW computer system in Kingston, Ontario, and can now be searched by keywords through the equipment provided by the trial project. Although still in the testing stage, the system promises to improve service to the public and to assist in the complex job of interpretation.

As with all knowledge workers, staff at the department deal with an ever-increasing body and complexity of information. And the system is helping place automated productivity technology into the hands of the decision maker, analyser, project manager and report writer, people who until now, have not had the benefit of office automation tools.

Project manager James Commins says the focus of the trial "is not so much on automation itself, but on how knowledge workers at various levels can use new electronic technology to improve their effectiveness through better communications and access to information."

Mr. Commins said because the results of the trial have been "very positive," plans are already underway to expand the system, linking managers in departmental regional offices across the country into the integrated network.

