Who's in charge?

The responsibility for these three converging technologies has traditionally resided in separate areas — at least in larger organizations. Computing resources generally fall under EDP managers; telecommunications under its own responsibility centre, and responsibility for office equipment often lies within the administration branch. No matter how good your experts are in each of these fields, they may not have the knowledge to plan an integrated office system. Since office automation is a new area of expertise, it requires a new breed of expert.

Who are the best planning experts we can find?

When we talk of office automation, we aren't talking about equipment, or even systems. At least not at first. We're talking about *your* office. What you do. How you work. Your management philosophy. Your lines of communication. Your managers. Your staff. Your working style. Your productivity. Your organization. Your business strategy. Your procedures. Your budget. Your hierarchy. Your need for efficiency. The physical environment of your workplace.

No outside vendor; no systems consultant; no office automation specialist will ever know your office the way you do. By all means use them. Take advantage of the expertise that's out there. But remember where the planning buck stops. Experts advise that you assemble a multi-disciplinary team which includes computer systems, applications, and communications specialists, with overall responsibility at the senior management level.

Top down, bottom up

Some of the most successful office automation systems begin with both top down and bottom up planning. The commitment of senior management is a prerequisite. A recent Woods Gordon survey of office productivity says, point blank, that the success of any productivity improvement program depends largely on the commitment of senior management.

But equally important is the participation by staff and workers at all levels. Some of the best office automation plans — on paper — have failed because of lack of consultation and input from those who would be using, and those who would be most affected by, changing technology. A lot of ink has been spilled recently about the negative effects of office automation, particularly on people and the quality of working life. But it need not be so. Those organizations which bring into the planning process managers and staff at all levels, which take the time to involve the office worker, and which foster a sense of contribution at all levels, are the ones which have chalked up the greatest office automation successes.

A process. Not a product

Office automation can best be described as a process, not a product. It will evolve and change over time, as your business evolves and as the technology itself changes. An office automation plan cannot be viewed as a once-and-for-all solution, a neat package cast in concrete and stamped by the CEO. Ideally, it should allow for expansion, and for future growth or change; it should be able to take advantage of whatever technological and software goodies come down the pipeline; and should be flexible enough to change and adapt as you do. Charles Darwin, of course, discovered that life itself works in exactly the same way — at least for those of us who survive!

A major investment

As necessary as office automation is becoming, it is also a very expensive investment. Depending on the systems; costs of equipment, software and training can run at $10,000, $30,000, or even more, per workstation. For many companies, office automation will represent one of the major investments of the 1980s.

Where to begin

Obviously, it is impossible to automate all of the offices in a company or organization at once. The idea of a terminal on every desk is still a futurist's dream. So where to begin? The word from many experts is to start with a pilot project. The pilot approach is invaluable, for it allows, at reasonably modest risk, the testing and performance evaluation of a system, the assessment of user reaction, and the refinement of features and system architecture before committing to major investments. It is also recommended that the pilot be in an area of the organization which can withstand the inevitable learning curve associated with office automation. Usually, a newly-automated office will continue to function with both the former, paper-based system as well as the new system, until bugs have been ironed out and the reliability of the new system has been assured.

Armed with the lessons learned from the pilot, an organization can then begin spreading the automated systems to other areas. Many experts recommend automating those operations which would benefit most from the new technologies and which are the most critical to your success as a company, or to your value as an organization.

Don't automate your mistakes

One of the lessons learned by companies which have automated — and a painful lesson it's been — is that a branch or division which is poorly managed, or in which there is lack of communication, is not likely to be saved by a computer. The reverse may in fact occur. Automation may compound managerial weaknesses.

Most automated offices show an initial productivity decrease as staff familiarize themselves with the new techniques. However, studies have shown that the productivity of offices which are well managed will improve after automation, and will continue to do so over time. In poorly managed environments, productivity may improve in the short term, but peter out over the long haul. Translation: automate your well-managed areas, and clean up poorly managed sectors or branches before submitting them to the new technologies.

"Computers will never replace office workers until they learn how to gossip"
— Anonymous