The automated executive

Even a short time ago, common wisdom had it that automation was fine for the troops, and even for middle managers, but not for the higher ranks. Many a senior executive felt that the kind of work he or she did — meetings, negotiations, strategy development, financial and marketing decisions — did not readily lend itself to automation. Changes have a habit of coming fast, though. A new research study by Trinet Inc. shows that 35 per cent of top executives in the Fortune 500 companies personally use computers or integrated systems when making crucial business decisions, and 23 per cent use computers at home or on the road.

The starting gate

Most senior executives approach office automation with three basic questions. What will it cost? What are the benefits? And how do I get started?

The need for planning

"We'll give the secretaries a couple of word processors, and put a few PCs on the managers' desks, as a start." Frivolous as that sounds, we have found that many companies or organizations do not engage in the depth and type of planning essential for the move to the integrated, automated office.

Often, the perceived complexity of office automation acts as a retardant to planning. "What's the use — it'll all change again in a few years anyway," is a common lament. Some companies put their faith in an equipment or systems vendor, as if the vendor has all the answers. Others may have developed an ingrained mistrust of "overplanning", a mistrust nurtured, perhaps, by past planning experiences. And still others leave the decision to section or branch managers — a chancy option at best, given the rapid moves toward system integration and the almost certain need for at least some of the equipment to be able to work together and communicate, if not now, then in the sooner-than-you-think future.

We are faced with a fundamental difference in the way technology has moved from individual tools to tools which serve the office as a whole — the office system. Here is what Tapscott, Henderson and Greenberg, authors of *Planning for Integrated Office Systems*, have to say:

"The new systems are much greater in scope than traditional computer, office or telecommunications sytems. Because they have a social and environmental, as well as a technological component, *they deeply and profoundly affect the nature of the organization*. Planning is essential to ensure that changes required to all three components of the work system are anticipated, and that all three are combined in the best manner or 'jointly optimized' for maximum organizational performance."

John J. Connell, Executive Director of the Office Technology Research Group in Pasadena, California, puts the issue of planning starkly:

"In a world where technology is becoming a significant factor in the workplace, the need for strategic planning is *paramount*."