

who complain of 'corrupted fax'. 'In the Brickfields area where the lines are very clean, it is fairly good. But in some parts of Ampang, where there are bad lines, many parts in a transmission are missing or blurred,' complains Raj.

In many cases, it is not that STM technicians do not respond to complaints of breakdown, it is just that many do not have the relevant equipment and know-how to rectify problems. This boils down to the question of training. 'I think more than 90 per cent of them (technicians) are trained on the basic telephone network. If anything goes wrong with the phone, they can handle it. But if it comes to the telex, only the remaining 10 per cent know how to attend to it,' says one banker. Banks, however, are grateful that STM has set up a specialised unit to look after data switching equipment called DOMC or Data Operation Maintenance Centre.

STM has also been congratulated on introducing value-added services, notably itemised billing and enhanced telephone facilities, last year. Itemised billing costing one ringgit is much appreciated by corporate clients since they can trace unnecessary calls by their staff. The demand now is for its services to be extended to other parts of the country. Syed Hussein says this will certainly be done. Eventually STM services will be available nationwide.

However, despite dealing with a private telephone company, many businessmen say they are still resigned to the fact that STM has a monopoly on services. In other words, they have no option, as they do in other countries. 'If anything went wrong with the phone in the US and is not repaired quickly I would just tell them to disconnect it and go to another phone company. They will have my phone wired up in no time at all,' one businessman says.



EARTH stations: Links with other countries

NEW PRODUCTS

SURPRISES IN STORE FROM STM

Commercial users will soar on telecommunications advances and benefits when STM introduces electronic mailing, a sophisticated mobile telephone and SWIFT. But at what price?

WHAT has Syarikat Telekom Malaysia in store for its customers in the months ahead? As a 'government' department in the past, this question would have raised proud disclosures. Now a private enterprise, STM is more guarded about what it says.

The preference for keeping planned services under wraps are based on normal commercial reasons — fear of arousing unnecessary lobbying and potential competition. But *Malaysian Business* finds that the business community may be taken on a leap in telecommunications technology when STM unveils its latest services.

The new products are likely to compete and even phase out existing telecommunications services. How well they are accepted and utilised will depend on the marketing abilities of STM and how receptive people are to paying. As with most new products, the high initial investment outlay tends to result in a high introductory price. The problem is this sets off a vicious circle: the high price deters wider usage, which in turn makes it uneconomical to operate except at higher cost.

For STM, this has to be approached

practically, given the need for profitability. STM can be expected to be down-to-earth in its pricing policy. Executive director Dr Syed Hussein acknowledges this: 'We have to expect returns from what we invest in.'

Mailing and messaging will take a modern turn when STM launches electronic mail or Telemail next year. This is an electronic version of the post office box. Using simple gadgets — the telephone, modem and personal computer of any make (with relevant software), a company can create messages and send them to any other company's electronic mailboxes at the touch of a few buttons. Messages are sent or retrieved using passwords.

ROUND THE CLOCK. For those who own PCs at home and don't want to pay the expensive start-up and operating costs of a telex or facsimile, electronic mail is ideal. The service is exceptionally convenient in that one can send or retrieve messages or information at any time of the day or night. It's a round-the-clock service. Speed is another plus point. Technically speaking, the speed for electronic transmission is measured in bits per second (bps) and it ranges

from 300 to 2,400 bps. In practical terms, this means being able to transmit 30 foolscap pages of information in less than a second.

For the initial launch, targeted for next January, STM is offering 3,000 mailboxes. It is making use of the Telemail 400 communication system developed by Telenet Communications Corporation in the US. Whether or not a company will subscribe, given the acknowledgement of its benefits, will depend on the charges proposed. Syed Hussein declines to reveal the tariffs STM has in mind, except to say that they will be based on volume and time.

However, to give an idea of the relative cost-benefit equation, Ngeam Chong Lee, general manager of Spectron Sdn Bhd, the local distributor for Telenet, says that in the US, there is an estimated saving of one-third of costs in electronic mailing compared with telexing.

Electronic mail services are already operating in countries like Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, Australia, Canada, Chile and the United States. But Malaysia will score a first when it launches Telemail since it will be the first Southeast Asian country to introduce a system that follows the X 400 international standard laid down by the International Telegraph and Telephone Consultative Committee (CCITT).

This means subscribers to Telemail in Malaysia can communicate with foreign mailboxes that comply with X 400. The latter include Hong Kong, Australia and the US — provided STM concludes agreements with these countries. But messaging Singapore is out since the mailing systems are based on different standards.

An enhancement of the electronic mail is the electronic document interchange or EDI. This facilitates the sending of stan-