The Office of the Future – Here Today

A Canadian success story

The long-awaited office of the future is here.

Over the past three years, a number of Canadian companies have co-operated in a massive program to develop and test integrated office systems. Now, these are in place, operating at locations throughout the country. The lessons learned through the program have resulted in state-of-the-art integrated office systems, a highly-competitive Canadian office automation industry, and some of the most thorough research on the use and effectiveness of these new systems to be found anywhere.

Hundreds of integrated terminals

Under the program, a series of large field trials was launched in federal government department offices, in which integrated office systems were installed in several organizations involving hundreds of staff at all levels, from support personnel to the highest levels of management.

The program, known as the Office Communications Systems program, was co-ordinated by the federal Department of Communications and involved the participation of office automation companies, users in federal government departments, and teams of researchers.

It was designed to develop, use and evaluate integrated systems, on which the office worker, at a workstation, could perform a wide range of tasks, including word processing, electronic messaging, analysis, document sharing, teleconferencing, remote database access, storage and retrieval, high quality graphics communication, and others.

The $12.5 million program was designed around five major office automation sites, each requiring the kinds of automation techniques most offices could benefit from, yet each setting unique. The mix of sites involved offices with different types of administration, policy making, office practices, management philosophies and communications channels. Some involved integration of operations in a single location, others involved integrated links between headquarters and field locations.

The organization of the field trials was a patient matching process between suppliers and users. Industrial representatives had the opportunity both to study the needs of departments selected for the trials and to present their approaches to automation.

The lessons of the program indicate that there is tremendous potential for improvements in office productivity through the new integrated systems. At the same time, they provided an invaluable opportunity as a learning process. As a Department of Communications report on the program concludes, the success of the trials "will not depend on problem-free progress, but on the clear identification of promising equipment and systems and the equally clear identification of pitfalls to avoid and of problems left to solve."

Clearly, the trials have been of tremendous benefit to participating Canadian companies. For the first time in history, the development of major systems has been able to proceed hand in hand with their use in live settings. Most technological and equipment development takes place in company R & D shops, far removed from the end user. "It was this synthesis between system development and actual use that was the key to the program's success," according to André Dubois, manager of the OCS program.

The experience of the field trials has positioned a number of Candian companies as international leaders in the new technology of office automation. Already, the benefits of this experience are resulting in a rapidly expanding awareness of, and interest in, the Canadian approach on the part of companies and organizations looking for office automation solutions.

Mr. Dubois said that the development of office automation products by suppliers to the trial projects was based on a very close relationship between the designers of the technology and the users. "The trial experience provided the vital missing link between R & D and commercialization," he said.

Besides the success of the field trials in the development and use of new integrated office systems, the program provided a living laboratory to assess the impact of new technology on working conditions, employment patterns, performance, worker response to technology, and job content.

The following articles describe the office of the future trials in more detail.