

ELECTRONICS AND THE FUTURE OF THE TCS

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when letters depended on sailing ships. Commercial agents had to act on situations as they found them, because getting a reply from Ottawa took months.

TP: *Are there other changes that Signet will bring to the department?*

Lambert: Signet is giving the department its first real corporate databases - CATS, WIN, Finance, and Infonnel. Because they will be fully integrated, and accessible to everyone, these will speed up all sorts of routine work. As an example, if a financial officer needs addresses for a transfer of funds, she can tap into Infonnel. At the corporate level, the databases are beginning to make information on departmental resources available directly to decision makers.

TP: *With all the current discussion of the information highway, do you see Signet being solely for internal communications, or will it eventually be connected to the outside world?*

Lambert: Signet already connects to the outside world through its X.400 gateway. (See *PANORAMA*, Number 33, August 15, 1994) Within the year, there should be 100,000 addresses accessible through Signet, allowing direct communications between officers in Foreign Affairs and their counterparts in other government departments; no longer will messages have to go through the headquarters of each department. As well, a secure dial-in facility will make it possible for almost anyone in the department to "tele-commute" if they wish. In general, it will lead to a more widely distributed department. Consider, for example, financial

transactions: Does it matter where the accountants are? Using Signet, transfers and other financial transactions can be issued from anywhere. If it would be cheaper to have the accounting section in St. John's, instead of Ottawa, why not?

TP: *But don't you lose authority if functions such as accounting are not co-located?*

Lambert: Not if the system is clear about what is to be done. Managers must be confident that their decisions will be followed. Over time, I believe we will move some support functions, such as accounting, out of the missions to a central location.

TP: *So, with this new system in place, what is a mission? What is its function?*

Lambert: A mission is a repository of knowledge. Missions are needed for personal interaction, and for national and personal influence. Missions have the best view of a country, because they're there. I've talked about the concept of using missions as country desks. I know there are many of my colleagues who disagree, and who argue with merit that a headquarters perspective is a fundamental requirement for all ministerial briefings. Nevertheless, at this point in our history, we've got the allocation of resources backwards. We're a foreign ministry with more of its officers in Ottawa than in the field. Signet should allow us to transfer mechanistic functions back to HQ and to put more sharp-end people abroad where they ought to be. A shrunken headquarters might annotate such a briefing, but would not write or rewrite it, as is done presently. Both deputy ministers want to shift more resources to missions.

TP: *What progress has been made on this transfer to the posts? Many people have the impression that the department is centralizing functions, in Ottawa, rather than decentralizing.*

Lambert: We are caught between the rock of fiscal framework pressures and the hard place that it is cheaper to maintain people in Ottawa than abroad. There is no general answer to the question. As I noted above, we can probably use technology to do more administrative work in HQ and use the savings to situate more officers abroad. We have also looked hard at moving program money into positions abroad, and a start has been made by creating a few trade officer slots from PEMD funds this summer (see *TRADE COMMISSIONER* Volume 1, No. 5). Change in this area is likely to be incremental as opposed to dramatic. However, you should also know that our ministers are also of the view that we need at the very least to try to preserve the current overseas establishment.

TP: *How have the budget cuts and this decentralization initiative worked together?*

Lambert: We now have 146 trade FS-1s and FS-2s and 63 trade EX-1s and EX-2s in missions. We have given missions more electronic tools to reduce the admin burden, and we have just about completed our review of small mission overheads in order to significantly reduce them. Officers in posts should be able to spend more time delivering programs.

TP: *Thank you Garrett, for talking with us and giving us your thoughts on where the information technology revolution will lead the Service in its second century.*