

DATA PREP GROWS WITH ON-LINE AT CCS

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We nearly dispensed with the data prep section two years ago." The speaker is John Roberts, operations director at Comprehensive Computer Ser-

vices (CCS) in Cleckheaton, Yorkshire. CCS is a company that offers many different services, and had to balance the potential commercial gains to be had from improving the data prep operation against the promise of other areas.

Roberts continues, "there were a number of problems: the main one was the difficulty in getting the girls to accept that we had to be more service-oriented – both quicker and better than the competition. We've always had a reputation for accurate keying, but organisationally we were not prepared to compete with similar data prep service companies."

Many companies would have elected to give up data prep in this situation. On-line transaction processing is rapidly taking over from batch work; the Gartner Group is predicting that it will account for 65% of all system sales in 1991, compared with just 43% in 1986. So the market for conventional keying is declining.

But CCS decided instead that data prep was still a good commercial proposition. As data preparation manager Mick Simmonds points out, the general change to on-line working is actually increasing the opportunities for data prep bureaux. "There is always data that companies cannot capture quickly using on-line data entry because of the quantities. Examples are year-end analyses for building societies, and stocktaking data for businesses. Now that companies no longer have sufficient volumes to justify in-house data prep resources, they are turning to bureaux like ourselves. CCS' decision has been justified by the results. The company has upgraded its existing system, a ROCC 2830 with 13 terminals, to a ROCC 2835 WMS with 16 workstations. With all the facilities of WMS software you can make optimum use of the ROCC system, therefore increasing productivity and efficiency. This in turn enables CCS to provide a more effective service to its customers. The staff has been increased from 21 to 30.

Data prep is just part of a wide portfolio of services offered by CCS. The company was founded in 1968 to provide computer services to a variety of companies and have been selling computer services successfully ever since. CCS has more recently moved into the direct marketing busi-





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ness. Originally in partnership with a Bradford company, CCS provided the computing resources whilst gaining expertise in the direct response market. CCS now runs its own business under the name CCS Computerlist, which provides a service to companies who have a direct marketing requirement. This venture has proved to be tremendously successful.

"Data prep has always been fundamental to our mainframe business. We started in the sixties with both punched card and paper tape data capture, and we also had keytapes," said Roberts.

The original technologies were replaced with key-to-disk in the seventies. CCS originally used CMC equipment, but switched to Redifon (as ROCC was then known) around 1980, and, says Roberts, "we've been happy ever since. ROCC is a service-oriented organisation like our own, and the product itself is stable and they understand the needs of a company like CCS."

The next major change occurred in 1987, when the question of disbanding the data prep section arose. Having judged that it was commercially worthwhile continuing, says John Roberts, "we decided we needed to spend time on the reorganisation of the department. This meant appoint-

ing a specialist manager, one with experience of running a large data prep department, and who had the same business thinking as myself."

The choice fell on Mick Simmonds, his brief being to get the section running efficiently, and then to expand it. Simmonds immediately brought his previous experience to bear on the task of improving the efficiency of the department. One innovation was the introduction of a bonus scheme. Not surprisingly, this encountered some resistance from the operators at first, but, says Simmonds, "they've now adjusted to it."

We had to fine tune it a couple of times to make sure it gives equitable results. The main reason is that more and more of our business involves names and addresses: before we entered the direct marketing business the work was mainly numeric, which is quite a different kind of keying."

Currently, around 30 percent of the data prep section's work is provided by the direct marketing operation. Another 10% is provided by the mainframe bureau activity, but the majority comes from external clients, and the proportion is increasing as CCS' reputation for service grows. Says Roberts, "we compete not only with the local bureaux, but

with some in the Midlands and now in the south-east as well. We can be price competitive with the bureaux based there because our overheads are less, and we can pass this margin on to the customer. But by being aware of the high level of service required by companies we do retain our responsiveness no matter the geographic locality. We are forecasting a 150% growth over last year."

The pressure of work suggests that CCS should be acquiring yet more new kit. But, says Roberts, "we want a steady workload, not one that goes up and down and leaves us in the poor periods with idle operators and unused terminals. However, our forecast shows that we should be looking to expand our capacity either by purchasing additional equipment or by acquisition."

Summarising the events of the past two years, Roberts says, "our decision has proved to be the right one. We've moved from our previous limited capability to the service-orientated efficiency that today's marketplace demands. That has provided us with a springboard for solid expansion."

Supervision of the ROCC 2835 WMS system with 16 workstations at CCS. Cleckheaton is the responsibility of Audrey Peters

