

Whither Data Capture?

*An interview with
Graham Nicholas, managing director
of Datapro Data Preparation*

Nicholas... "We are not only adapting to change, we are growing through change."

The data capture industry is set to grow, according to Graham Nicholas, md of Datapro Data Preparation, Brighton. The industry is now maturing and companies are turning to it with their long term data prep and file maintenance requirements. Datapro is set to

exploit this new growth by taking advantage of the flexibility of a new ROCC 2835 multiuser computer.

"In the 1970s Datapro was the largest data preparation bureau in the UK, employing over 400 staff. In the belief that data prep was set to decline, Datapro diversified by opening a laser printing business," said Nicholas. The printing business proved so successful that in 1986 the group was bought out by Microgen plc.

"I later bought back the data entry part of the business. At the time it was sold to Microgen, everyone believed data entry would be done directly via desk terminals, by the end user, with a declining need for external data prep bureaux.

"For many reasons, end users were slow in taking up the technology. I realised that PCs were not going to provide the total solution which everyone has assumed – there would remain a need for specialised data capture bureaux to provide an efficient, quality service," said Nicholas.

The data preparation market has begun to mature after a long shake out period. It has suffered in the past from its image as the Cinderella of the computer services sector. The industry has a history of being unreliable – because its clients have been unwilling to contract work.

"Gaining customer commitment has been crucial to stabilising the industry," said Nicholas. "A situation often arose where a client would contact a bureau and place a job for a million application forms to be processed over a one-week period (for example). If the client failed to receive the application forms, there was no work for the bureau and the bureau did not get paid – even though the work had been scheduled.

"This might have been efficient for companies who were effectively paying a piece rate for each



job, but it was very damaging to the industry. By scheduling work which might not arrive, costs would be incurred without the revenue to cover them: many went to the wall.

"As the number of bureaux has declined, so has the industry capacity. The squeeze has forced clients to book time in advance. This forced commitment has given the industry a basis on which to plan and the quality of its service is consequently improving," Nicholas concluded.

The type of work done by the data prep industry is set to change, according to Nicholas. Overflow data capture (where in-house data prep resources contract out excess work and seasonal peaks) is a diminishing sector. Another shrinking area is database creation. Although there are a number of large databases still awaiting construction, eg. Poll Tax registers, given the sensitivity surrounding the security of data held by public bodies about individuals, they will most probably be created by the end users.

"The growing activity is database maintenance. Companies of varied backgrounds are finding that registers of shareholders, payroll files and other large dynamic databases can be more efficiently maintained by a specialised bureaux, like Datapro," Nicholas said.

Nicholas is expanding Datapro's file maintenance activity into new areas. Looking at the storage of information conceptually, he argues there are strong similarities between a payroll list and a technical manual. Both are accumulations of information, requiring frequent amendment. As such they lend themselves to being built up and held as records on a computer.

By using its sister printing company, XPS, Datapro will by March of 1989, offer a complete service for the creation, printing and updating of technical manuals.

"Text will be keyed onto our new ROCC 2835. The resultant tapes will be used by a commercial printing system as the raw data from which we will type-set and print. Text files created in this way can be easily altered, making updates both quicker and cheaper than other publishing methods," Nicholas explained.

We may choose to use the option of directly linking our printing system to the ROCC 2835, using a PC network. Of course we could also use the PCs for data capture and the network would give us



the further option of using non-keyboard data capture, like optical character readers.

"ROCC's unique WMS operating system, offers us other advantages. Most software is written to deal with the record level, but WMS addresses documents (files). This is obviously of importance to anybody working in the area of database maintenance. Also, where large users are converting to WMS, it is important that we use the same software, in order to handle their overflow work," Nicholas added.

Datapro currently uses two ROCC 2805 in Aldershot, for data capture, with 29 keystations and has installed the ROCC 2835 in Brighton to replace a redundant system with 20 terminals.

"This is a purchase for the future," said Nicholas. "Our current systems would not allow us to expand beyond 20 workstations, and we need 30. We have expanded the building to handle it. We are considering replacing the system in Aldershot as well, with a twin ROCC 2835.

"As the data prep industry continues to mature and to grow, Datapro Data Preparation will be building on its 20 years experience, and searching for other innovative areas to which it can apply its data capture expertise. We are not only adapting to change, we are growing through change. The ROCC 2835 gives us the flexibility to meet these demands and to maximise that growth," concluded Nicholas.

Datapro has two bureau operations, pictured are managers Tuula Tuominen, Brighton (left) and Sharon Chapple, Aldershot.