

Fletchers
1990

FROM POTS AND PANS TO STATE OF THE ART COMPUTER SERVICES

Computer technology is a volatile and fast moving business. More and more powerful hardware and software techniques are appearing all the time and it takes a company with an eye to the future to succeed.

So how have companies addressed the changes?

One company keeping abreast of developments and changes in

demand is Fletcher Computer Services (FCS) of Sheldon, Birmingham. It began modestly in the mid-sixties as an adjunct to an innovative ironmongery wholesaler offering computer services to small companies unable to afford the luxury of their own mainframe. The company is now in a position where the data capture division is one of four areas

of specialisation under Fletcher's group umbrella.

The company was incorporated in June 1965 as a computer bureau for Fletcher Hardware (pots and pans that is), and celebrates its silver jubilee this year.

As a data processing bureau, Fletcher's business flourished and in 1973 John Davis, now chairman and managing director, joined the company. In 1975 three of the directors including Davis were involved in a management buyout and subsequently Davis bought out the other two. Therefore for fifteen years he has been at the helm of a totally independent company.

Throughout the seventies the data capture bureau continued to prosper. The range of work was extended from the processing of sales ledgers etc, to fleet control for customers such as the BASS brewery, now a Fletcher's customer of sixteen years standing. These new fleet management products were marketed under the Fleetplan banner. The Fleetplan business developed rapidly and in 1979 a subsidiary company was formed - FCS Fleetplan Ltd.

In 1982 Fleetplan was offered as a turnkey service in addition to the bureau facility, to run on client sites on almost any type of hardware, from PC to mainframe. Fleetplan is now one of the most well known IT solutions for fleet and plant management in every kind of organisation, both private and public. Fleetplan is also sold by agents in South East Asia and Australasia.

But as Davis explains: "Diversification into new areas such as these does not diminish the importance of the data capture area; far from it. It is due to the continued growth and expansion of data processing services



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A rapidly developing area is FCS's skill in project management of very large data conversion contracts involving in some cases up to 20 subcontracting companies. For example FCS played a key role in managing recent government privatisation data capture contracts and other major share issues and takeovers. This experience has also enabled the company to win contracts for the capture of large national databases which are being converted from hard copy records. FCS also provides disaster contingency backup for data capture installations.

The work load of the data capture bureau, with mainframe processing backup, continues to evolve and increase. Direct mail, coupon promotions and share issues are all examples of recent work performed. Most of this work, in fact 50-70%, involves the keying in of thousands of names and addresses.

For this reason FCS is one of the first customers to take on board the new ROCCAddress retrieval package - ROCCAddress. FCS has been a ROCC user for almost 12 years and has a very good working relationship with ROCC. Also, as Davis states: "Because we are a large and heavily loaded bureau, we are ideal to test the power of this new system."

ROCCAddress is designed for speeding up the retrieval of addresses in the high speed, multi-user environment of data capture. By simply keying in a house number and its post code, the full address is retrieved from a file stored on the hard disk.

ROCCAddress has many benefits. A keyboard operator averages 12,000 key depressions per hour. To enter the data of a name and address conventionally, an average number of 65 keystrokes is required. Using ROCCAddress, and keying in just the name and postcode, can reduce that average to around 30 keystrokes. The implications for productivity therefore are considerable as the operators can process much more work in the same time.

The file from which the addresses are retrieved, is based on the regularly updated Postal Address File issued under licence by the Post Office. This gives



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detailed information on the country's 23 million private and business addresses and is reliable and accurate information. The benefits to the customer are clear - a faster and more accurate service.

ROCCAddress and the new ROCC 2830 computer are now installed at FCS, replacing the previous system, a ROCC 2805. As Terry Jenkins, Fletcher's data processing director explains, "we are very excited about the capabilities of ROCCAddress and are working well with ROCC both on our testing of the system and on training ourselves to get maximum benefit from all the functions the system offers."

The increase in productivity however is estimated to be so great that once the system is fully tried and tested, FCS also expects to be able to offer an improved batch processing service to other businesses. Such a service will bring not only extra revenue for FCS but is expected to be of considerable economic benefit to the customer.

"After evaluating other similar systems we chose ROCCAddress as being the best product," said

Jenkins.

The future looks good for Fletcher Computer Services. 1989 saw the best ever profits for the company - £200,000 before tax from a turnover of around £3.5 million. Profits coming mainly from the Fleetplan, Data Processing and MOD divisions are invested in further diverse yet related areas of computer services.

The newest venture is an Open Systems Training Centre which presently employs two people and sub-contracts lecturers to offer instruction on the use of Unix and Pick-based systems.

Fletcher Computer Services now employs 95-100 people and will soon be re-formed as the Fletcher Group.

The stability of the company is well reflected in the fact that among the employees are no less than 11 with more than ten years' service. As FCS approaches its silver jubilee, the company will no doubt reflect on how far it has come and, well equipped to address the next challenges as they arise, can look forward with confidence to the future. ■