

MORE FOR LESS

Keeping control of administration costs is a priority for any organisation. The HM Treasury (Computer Centre) in Chessington, which deals with Civil Service payroll, has saved over 60 per cent of costs for some of its users against their previous payroll systems.

This is why the computer centre has grown to administer payment of over £1.5 billion of salaries a year. It also provides the Civil Service with financial management information, personnel

records, manpower statistics, and superannuation awarding for central government, associated bodies and privatised public bodies.

"We have grown from small roots," said Ian Kirkpatrick, assistant director operations. "But our growth is testimony to our efficiency. In fact, we were one of the first departments in the Civil Service to use a computer, starting back in the early 1960s."

In 1981 the Civil Service was extensively reorganised, and the Chessington computer centre

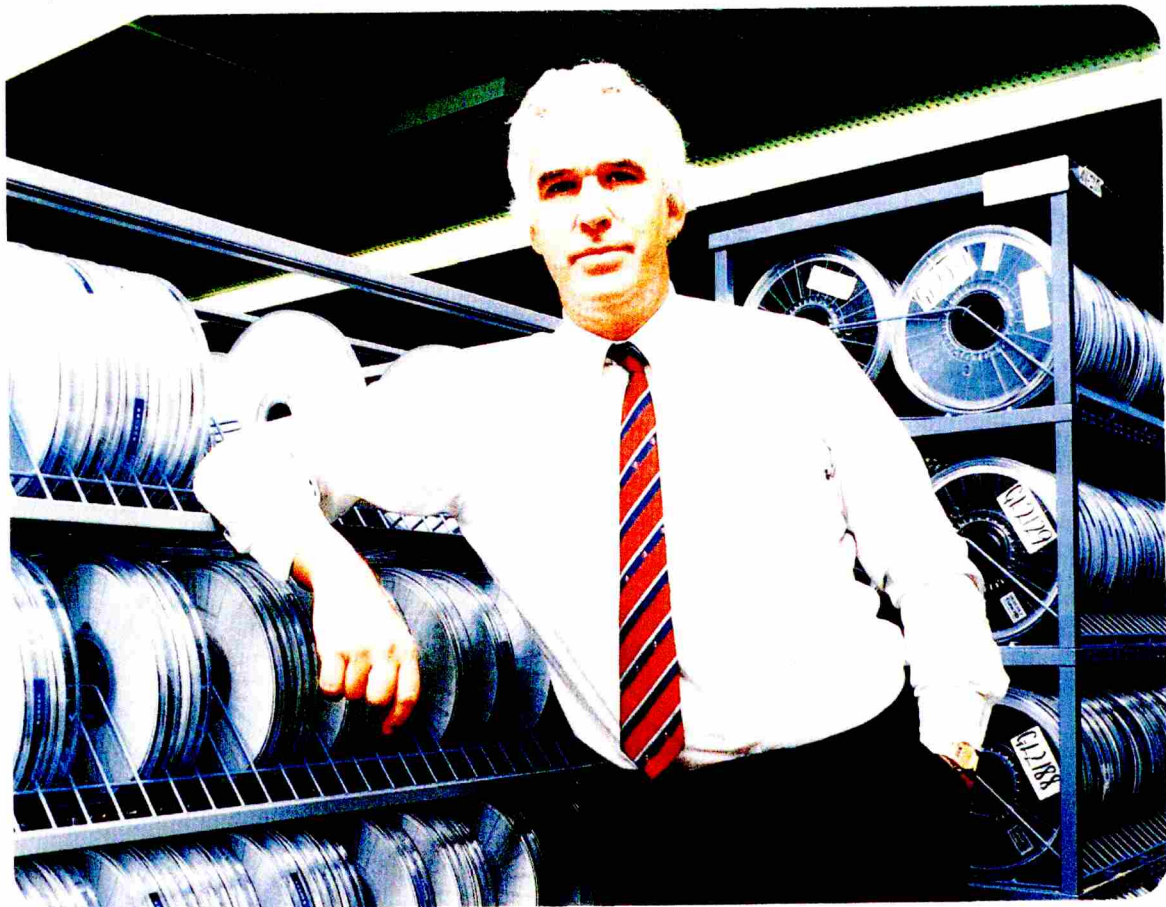
moved from the control of the Civil Service Department to the Treasury.

Economies of scale

"In the last five years we have driven the cost of our services down by 40 per cent in real terms, and that comes from both improved efficiency and economies of scale," said Kirkpatrick.

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a staff of over half a million. Since there is a common pay structure across the Civil Service we have been able to market a single payroll product across departments. As we process more and more work, our unit costs decrease, making us very economic to use."

The computer centre is overall responsible for processing the salary payments for 300,000 staff, (60 per cent of the Civil Service), 150,000 of whom are paid directly at Chessington, and its superannuation software is used by all departments. "Whereas the role of other departments is to manage agriculture or industry for example, our primary role is payroll administration. This gives us an expertise, making it sensible for us to process their payroll for them," said Kirkpatrick.

If government departments send their payroll administration to the computer centre, they save by needing fewer operational staff, no technical payroll computer staff and no payroll computer resources. Since the computer centre already has these resources on tap, the only additional overheads it takes on are clerical staff and data prep. "This means our capital resources are used more fully, pushing down the unit cost for every new client, making our services cheaper for our existing users," Kirkpatrick explained.

The core of the computer centre is a dual processor ICL series 39 level 80 around 400 terminals distributed nationally across user departments. This gives users

who need it, on-line access to information. Other applications with less time critical information use batch data entry and hard-copy reports. For this the computer centre uses a ROCC 2830 minicomputer with 48 workstations (eight of which are remotely located), transferring data to tape as required.

Varied

"We offer a range of services, which place varied demands upon our computers," explained Michael Cook, technical support manager. The departmental staff records system provides a personal information service to the majority of departments whose pay is located at Chessington. This is where users make the most intensive use of the on-line facilities.

Other departmental personnel databases feed quarterly snapshot information to Chessington for use by Treasury statisticians on manpower research and modelling. The Superannuation system provides award calculations for all non-industrial Civil Servants. The Financial Accounting system provides full domestic accounting facilities for some 11 departments.

Payroll places very different demands upon the centre. As well as having monthly deadlines to meet, there are large numbers of changes made to the records every week. These are as varied as noting promotions and resignations, and paying allowances and

overtime. This makes workloads very volatile, and creates a large data entry requirement. In fact, the centre keys 21 million key depressions a month, with a large peak load in the middle of the month.

Most of the software has been developed by the computer centre's 105 development staff. The centre uses a mixture proprietary and own-developed software, which is constantly being adapted to meet the changing needs of the Civil Service. Changes are caused both by legislation or by reorganisation of civil service departments.

"We expect the mix of our services to change in the next couple of years. All our systems now have on-line facilities, and we expect with further developments planned to double the number of terminals for our users in the next two years," said Cook.

On-line cost

Chessington's on-line systems give immediacy of access to databases in a cost effective manner, however a significant role remains for batch based facilities where the information is collected for use at one point in time only, like payroll, according to Cook.

The ROCC computer is used mainly for payroll work, where currently large volumes of bulk data capture are done efficiently using a dedicated computer. Whilst more users will transfer to using on-line systems, bulk data entry requirements associated with regular tasks like payroll will ensure a continued role for a data capture computer.

Reliable

"The ROCC equipment has proven to be very reliable, and on the rare occasion that problems have arisen, ROCC's support service has been swift and helpful.

"We have already managed to create a circle whereby our economies of scale makes our service extremely cheap and efficient, bringing us further business and taking costs down a further step," said Cook. Using a mix of services and computing systems the Chessington Computer Centre is set to continue saving the taxpayer money. ■