

TV paves the way for Information Brokerage

Impact On trading

LESS THAN two years after entering the commercial minicomputer market proper, Redifon Computers has released a new 'office of the future' mini system as well as additions to its existing product range. Redifon's claim to be Britain's second-biggest home grown computer company — after ICL — is backed up by its turnover of 3 million in 1979 and an estimated base of some 3,000 items in Western Europe. In Early 1978, the company expanded from its wholly base in key-to-disc entry systems into the mini market with its R-range six compatible mini-based items (see *Minicomputer* 15 May 1978 for full details). Now Redifon has announced details of the 800 'Office Revolution' which combines Viewdata, word processing, data processing, distributed processing, image processing

and data entry in a system which, according to managing director Mike Aldrich, "will have an impact on the trading position of every enterprise".

The R1800 makes use of five major technologies — computers, television, image processing, telecommunications and what the firm refers to as 'human interface software'.

Redifon has developed its own software based on the Viewdata protocols to enable VDUs in the system to be used for conventional purposes such as transaction processing or word processing (as well as data entry) but also to interface with the Post Office's Prestel system to enable the users' screens to be used as viewdata terminals.

After threatening the all-singing, all-dancing computer system for years, the computer industry has finally done it for real. An integrated office system which marries the intelligent colour TV set with the minicomputer — and which processes handwritten input — is the latest offering from Redifon Computers. Here we examine the system and just why Redifon expects a whole new industry to emerge — Information Brokerage.

Redifon calls this implementation 'Viewdata Plus' and it enables the system to receive output from Ceefax, Oracle or Prestel as well as providing real-time transaction processing, file updating and computing, multi-level access security and file management.

Another interesting feature of the R1800 system is that it includes the 'Writaway' terminal for the transmission and processing of hand-printed information in real time.

First model in the series is the R1800/50 which can support up to 64 Viewdata terminals, up to 32

alphanumeric VDU screens and up to 32 Writaway hand-printing terminals. Storage is up to 600 megabytes with 4 tape drives, two floppy disc drives and up to 33 printers.

This model is based on the Redifon-designed micro-coded processor, the R5000, which drives terminals, intelligent television sets, peripherals and

communications. The R5000 is a 16-bit processor with a cycle time of 400 nanoseconds with up to half a megabyte of main memory and up to 8 megabytes of virtual memory. This processor is three times faster than the firm's previous processor design — the R3000A.

The Viewdata terminals are 20-inch or 26-inch intelligent colour televisions that are switchable between the Post Office Prestel system and the R1800. Full colour, graphics and various keyboards are available. The Viewdata Plus protocol enables other viewdata services to be received as well as all broadcast television, and up to 64 concurrent Viewdata job executions are permitted.

The Writaway hand-print terminals are designed for use in offices or factories and are microprocessor controlled, enabling 32 characters of hand printing to be written per line on a document and simultaneously automatically capture and processed by the R1800/50.

Quite apart from the technical capabilities of the new system — modestly dubbed the Office Revolution by its British designers — Redifon forecasts that its R1800 will have a major impact on working methods, and even



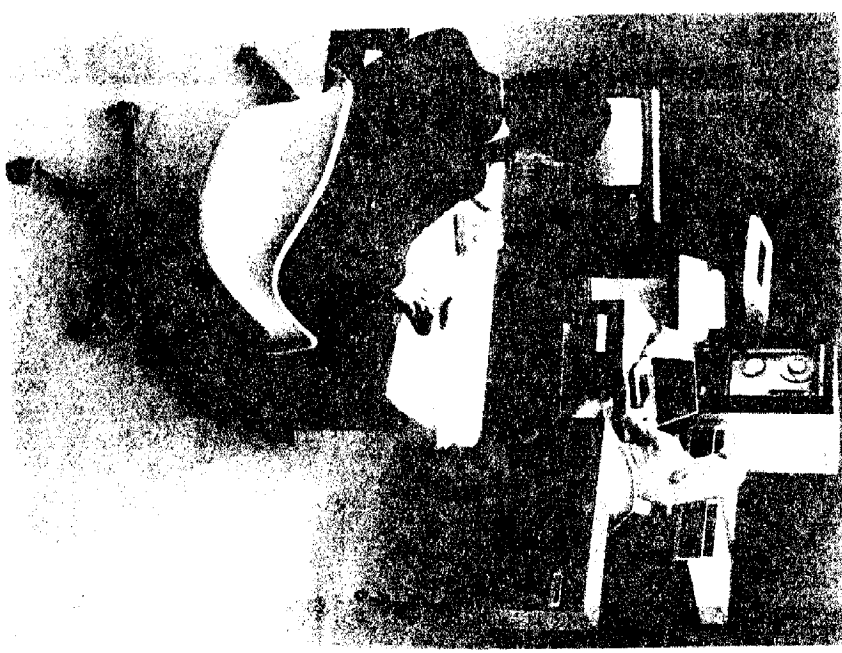
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what constitutes an
company says its
focuses attention on
'within' and 'without'
communications problem in
solutions. Until now, it
computer-based systems
been used to improve
within' organisation
communications — bringing

about major changes. Redifon, though, differs markedly in what it defines as an 'office' — focussing on the objective rather than the function.

This shift in view it expects to 'cause consternation among "experts" but will bring relief and understanding from general management who are struggling to better utilise their assets — human and otherwise.'

The new system impacts a company's trading position because it addresses the "without" problem as well as the "within" problem. Those who implement it will derive substantial and, perhaps, permanent competitive advantage. At the same time they will reduce overhead costs. Those who do not implement it will be at a disadvantage. Competitive conditions will be reversed.



Redifon Computers' Future Office System is an integrated office system capable of handling data, text, image and graphics from three types of multi-function workstations: intelligent colour televisions, hand-print terminals and visual display units.

The substitution of one supplier for another will be forced by customers demanding better service.'

Redifon expects the impact to be felt on all direct selling activities, where salaried time is generally split between around 70 per cent on communication, administration and travelling to only around 30 per cent selling.

"Improved communications," says the firm, "will cut administrative paperwork, telephone bills and much travelling. The impact will then be felt in every marketing activity because much of the problem of communicating with the customer has been eliminated. Those companies that do not change face decline. The business of marketing has been changed."

Redifon expects a whole new business to be created which it terms the 'Value added information business' or 'Information Services Broker'.

The 'information service broker' will install a Viewdata Plus system with intelligent colour televisions located in his clients' premises. He will provide a directory of information and action services. For example, local shops would advertise special offers on his system. The broker would take the order, pass it on to the shop, arrange delivery and even collect money. He would make a profit on the value of transactions handled, paid by the suppliers of goods.

The various service businesses, particularly travel agents, estate agents and insurance brokers would be immediately impacted. Real-time transaction completion and improved communication will change the nature of the business.

The nature of telephone usage will change. Clarification telephone calls will be greatly reduced. Connection will improve. At present, 28-30 per cent of telephone calls made in the UK do not reach the person being called — for many reasons. But time and money is being wasted. Leaving a message in the computer is an obvious application, but resolving most or all of the problem with the computer is the best solution; and that is feasible.

The length of telephone calls will drop says Redifon. The average telephone call in the UK is 1½-2 minutes. Half of the time on a business call is taken up with salutation and social discourse — essential in some businesses. With Viewdata Plus, the information and transaction interchange can be completed quickly and effectively.

The immediacy of the medium of Viewdata Plus, Redifon believes, will change the approach to promotional campaigns. One day promotional campaigns will become common. The cost of mounting campaigns will in many cases be trivial compared with older methods. 'special offers' as part of the Viewdata Plus salutation page will be common.