University Computing Company (UCC) BIRMINGHAM

Is University Computing Company (UCC) so called because it is associated with a University? In fact the connection is purely historical and arose because the American parent company was originally located on the campus of the Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. An equally valid question would be to ask how Redifon is associated with UCC, since it is for its large-scale mainframe computer service that UCC is internationally well known. In this case the two companies do have a real connection because in UCC's Head Office in Birmingham is a 24-terminal, two-processor, Redifon installation performing vital functions in the comprehensive service offered by UCC.

Although UCC are probably most well known for their computer networks that link users from widespread locations to mainframe processing facilities via terminals and high speed transmission lines, UCC also offer all the normal mainframe computer bureau services. It is in this area that the Redifon equipment plays its part. Data capture is as much of a problem for UCC customers as for any computer user, and UCC are able to help solve data capture as well as data processing problems, and so provide a complete service. Nowadays, all the data prepared on the company's two Redifon systems goes for further processing on the in-house Univac mainframes. In this respect UCC differ very substantially from the other bureaux featured in these articles since they do not offer a self-contained data preparation and pre-processing service. Nevertheless, the data preparation operation at UCC functions as an essentially separate accounting unit, required to be profitable in its own right and not to be unduly subsidised by its mainframe "big brother". As such, data preparation is carried out in the same alert competitive way that is essential to a bureau whose sole existence depends on it.

However, perhaps the most important thing that divides UCC from practically all other Redifon Users is in their approach to the use of Redifon equipment. To UCC the production of clean data for mainframe processing is only of secondary importance: they are exceptional in having very large amounts of mainframe time readily available and they generally find it quicker, cheaper and less labour-intensive to run mainframe edits to detect errors, correct simple ones and list more complex ones, than to detect and correct errors at the data capture stage. Nevertheless, the Redifon equipment is more than justified in their installation for another of its features — the ease with which erroneous records can be retrieved and changed at a later stage, once a specialist clerk has investigated and corrected the errors as listed by the mainframe in its edit runs.

Mike Muir, the Client Centre Manager, explained the philosophy as follows: "In our business, the data preparation department represents a highly labour-intensive area in what is otherwise a mechanised, technical, capital intensive operation. Our approach tends to be if it can be done on the mainframe, do it on the mainframe; if we can avoid using people, then we will avoid using people; but if we cannot, then we will use the Redifon system for its excellent correction facilities".

This approach is amply illustrated in the operation of UCC's "Mailplan - 3" package. This is a highly developed, specialised mailing system, under which a customer's name and address lists are effectively and confidentially maintained and controlled. When a customer first decides to use the "Mailplan -3" system, his existing name and address lists must first be captured from whatever source they are currently stored, which might be anything from a typewritten script to addressograph plates or magnetic tapes. All his names and addresses, together with product codes or other relevant information, are entered on the Redifon systems. Only the most basic checks are applied to the input data since the emphasis is on speed of entry (and the operators' bonus system reflects this emphasis).

UCC-Data Preparation Department.

The resultant name and address data is then subjected to complex mainframe computer editing techniques, to check addresses for postal validity and to eliminate duplicate names and addresses. Postal validity is decided according to stringent requirements laid down by the Post Office. Simple address errors can be corrected by a mainframe "auto-correction" program, but generally on any new list of names and addresses a proportion will still be rejected as postally undeliverable. These are listed by the mainframe, and corrected manually by specialised clerks who refer to all relevant sources from A to Z maps to post code books. All the corrections are then entered on the Redifon systems and subsequently incorporated into the mainframe files to create easily maintained lists of postally valid addresses that can be used, selectively if required, for a customer's mail shots. The addresses in the files are sorted according to 'destination post town' sequence to enable customers to claim the substantial Post Office rebates available to pre-sorted mailings of this kind. As Mike Muir put it: "We aim to make ourselves the SPECIALISTS for name and address lists and the Redifon is an ideal machine to help us achieve this objective".

Although "name and address" input forms the bulk of the work done by the Redifon systems, other classic applications like stock control, sales ledger and payrolls are also important. All the applications are extremely time-critical and it was the need for greater insurance in the form of a complete back-up, together with the need for increased capacity, that influenced UCC's decision, in Spring 1979, to order an R300 data entry system. Tom Barrett, UCC's Production Manager, commented "Although we expanded and increased our costs, the data preparation department was still profitable, and the presence of a back-up machine has proved its worth on a number of occasions".

Being a large mainframe installation, UCC has a separate systems and programming staff who not only have their mainframe programs entered on the Redifon equipment, but are also responsible for the Redifon programs themselves. Redifon programs are subjected to the same standards and documentation procedures as mainframe programs, and despite their simpler nature are treated in much the same way. This generalised approach to the programming aspect illustrates the fact that at UCC the Redifon systems represent just one cog in a big wheel. Nevertheless, it is an important and efficiently functioning "cog" whose contribution plays a vital part in the overall working of the whole machine, which for UCC (as for any bureau) must be well-oiled and smooth running to ensure survival in a very competitive market place.