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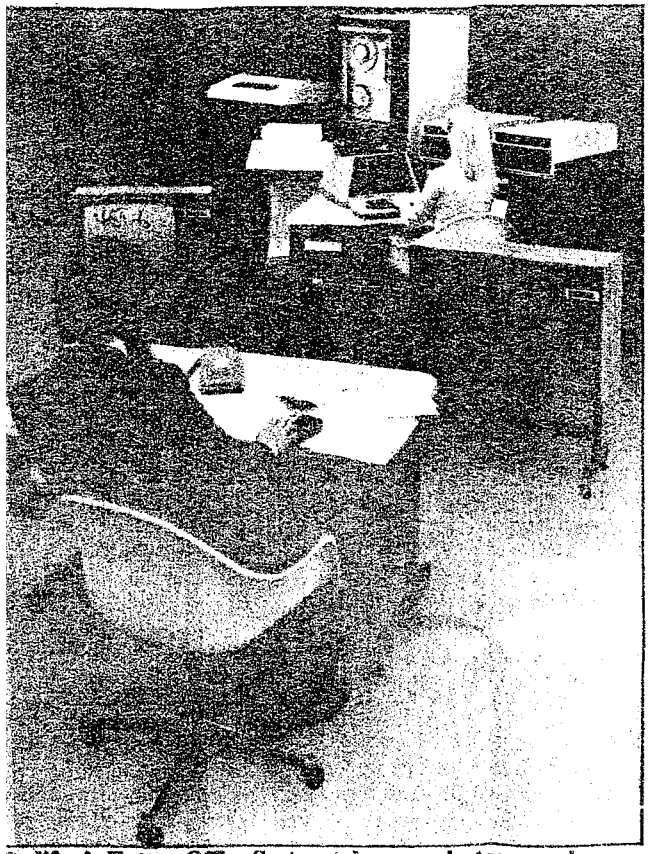

Redifon's Future Office System takes a modest approach

Redifon goes for office killing with humble tv

By Alan Cane

Theoretical strategies for the electronic office of the future are more abundant than real hardware at present. So the first vendors in the marketplace — assuming they have something close to the right approach — stand to make a killing.

What are Redifon's chances with its R1800 Series launched this week?

After all, only two weeks ago, Jay Stoffer of Delphi, which is supplying the very powerful processors at the heart of the yet-to-be-revealed Nexos office architecture, warned that today's designs would not pass muster: 'The requirements of the so-called automated office cannot be satisfied by a random collection of intelligent black boxes with an ability to communicate with each other' (*Computing*, March 13).

And here is Redifon with basically that: a new and very fast processor based on bit slice technology, a humble domestic television with substantial intelligence bolted on the back and a microprocessor-based hand written input device (it may have a Redifon label on the front but the device is easily recognised as the Quest Micropad).

Each of the manufacturers in the field seems to have started from its own position of strength — Nexos with the Delphi processor, Xerox with the intelligent copier, IBM with the 8100 distributed processing hardware.

So with Redifon, but its strength, through its membership of the Rediffusion group, is in the manufacture at reasonable unit-cost of colour televisions. Redifon's office of the future is therefore television- or more correctly viewdata-based.

Michael Aldrich, newly promoted to managing director of Redifon Computers, believes this is a crucial ingredient.

A tough and aggressive marketing man, Aldrich now talks behavioural psychology with the best: 'We started out from the view that the human interface was critical. We needed "non-threatening" devices that managers could use — and the most non-threatening device we could envisage was the domestic colour television.

It can be operated by a four-year old — in fact we get little kids to work the system as part of the test procedures.'

Aldrich also believes Redifon has taken a different line in addressing the problem of communication *within* a company between employees, and *outside* between the company and its clients.

It means the development of the 'information service broker' as Redifon puts it. 'The broker will install a Redifon viewdata plus system with intelligent colour televisions located in his client's premises. He will provide a directory of information and action services, take orders, arrange delivery, even collect money. He would make a profit on the value of transactions handled, paid by the suppliers of goods.

The Redifon approach is some way off the more extravagant ideas of the electronic office that have been promoted.

For example, most future scenarios include the multi-function workstation, a total replacement for the existing desk. It would have to include typing facilities, telephone facilities, archiving and so on.

forms of workstation: the intelligent viewdata televisions with their simple keypad entry devices, orthodox visual display units (vdus), and the Micropad hand written entry devices. All are by now quite familiar and well-tested methods of communicating with computers.

The Redifon announcements consist of the office system itself — the R1800/50 — and its associated products such as Writaway (Redifon's name for Micropad) and viewdata plus, together with the R800/70 advanced distributed processing system and the R300/70 and R400/70 advanced data entry systems.

Aldrich saw the R800 as the essential bridge between what Redifon used to do in data entry and distributed processing and its new stance in the electronic office, just as he sees the R1800 as a link to the fully integrated electronic office.

The whole project was developed in great secrecy — the individual modules were code-named after the small villages surrounding Redifon's Crawley headquarters which led to a certain confusion among the staff. And when all the software on the R800 machines was quietly upgraded earlier this year to R1800 compatibility — what Redifon calls Virtual Machine 2 — it led to considerable confusion among users and some criticism in the computer press.

There is no doubt that the quality of the Redifon television image is good, but hardly up to the standard of the best vdus. Aldrich dismisses this criticism, arguing that the tvs are chiefly for management which needs specific information at specific times — standard vdus would be used for any continuous period of input or interrogation.

The Redifon system certainly offers simple, cheap entry into the electronic office, and it is available now. But equally there is no doubt that it is unsophisticated technology.

Redifon is already thinking ahead according to Aldrich. Facsimile transmission and reproduction is on its list of future developments, as is voice input. Aldrich, however, is sceptical about the value of voice store and forward. 'It is a very expensive technology and people are reluctant to trigger action on voice alone. They prefer a written record.'

Aldrich has just finished telling all his sales staff what the new systems are all about — the 'Damascus' presentation as he puts it.

Now it remains to be seen if the Redifon tactic — of basing office systems around hardware as familiar as the tv set — will be successful against the sophisticated plans of other manufacturers. What of IBM with its office products division and massive research and design budgets? Aldrich says: 'When it sees this, IBM will be making domestic tv sets inside a year.'