

ROCC

MICHAEL ALDRICH

PRESS CUTTINGS

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Employment: while most firms are still looking ahead nervously, the head of one computer company is planning to create more jobs

Niche services prove the key to survival



Sold as ROCC, Michael Aldrich says his company could not have shifted direction so radically if it were not independent

ability to sell on to people who are not used to dealing with the public. Consequently, rather than merely trying to satisfy present requirements by hiring people with specific skills, he is looking to take on the young people who have been the company's traditional base.

For a comparatively small private company, ROCC has always been fairly sophisticated about its recruitment. Extensive links have been made with local schools and colleges through the mothers of bright students, because they are likely to want their children to work locally.

Once recruited, employees are trained and developed — the theory being that customer satisfaction begins with employee satisfaction. As a result, many employees who are only in their mid-twenties have been working for the company during holidays and on sandwich courses for nearly a decade. It is a deliberate policy founded on the belief that "long service is very good for stability".

This does not hold only for junior staff. Mr Aldrich has been chairman and chief executive for 14 years, and other executives have served similar terms. "When you've got a bunch of people that have worked with you for a long time you have a responsibility to them as well," said Mr Aldrich.

The directors are also looking to the next generation. Mr Aldrich has two sons in the business and Mr Bankes has one. As Mr Aldrich says, that means "your perspectives are different. It's important what happens in the next 10 years".

He contrasts that with life in a quoted company, which he experienced before joining Rediffusion, where executives are forced to try to achieve results quickly because of the constant attention given to the share price.

As a result, they tend to build up huge debts because they are not given time to work plans through — and are consequently more likely to fail.

Not surprisingly, he has no interest in going public. Pointing out that it would have been impossible for the company to change direction in the way it had if ROCC had been quoted on the Stock Exchange, he says that it goes back to the question of whom you're trying to serve.

"You've got to look after customers and the people who helped create the wealth, and reward them properly," he says. "And that doesn't really lend you to say 'Let's go public and line our pockets'."

By Roger Trapp

known as Redifon, was an old-established electronics company that got into computers via flight simulation.

It built on this to specialise in marketing data capture systems based on mini-computers. After Mr Aldrich and his fellow executive directors formed a consortium with Charterhouse Development Capital Fund to buy the company in November 1984, they initially carried on that business.

But then the computer business came under pressure and they decided to draw up a five-year plan to combat the changing market.

Mr Aldrich sees survival as all about developing a niche, which he defines as "a quarter of an inch deep and two miles wide". This means looking for 10-year relationships with organisations, to make the position secure. "We're just about there," he said.

Because the maintenance industry is undergoing a consolidation — as a result of computers becoming more reliable and their users growing more demanding — ROCC has been buying technical services organisations to feed a large network, with the aim of adding value to the basic service that is usually offered.

The systems side will grow organically though, and that is where Mr Aldrich believes the new jobs will be.

Although his determination to create openings is partly motivated by his conviction that the economy will not recover properly until more people are put back to work, it is also an acknowledgement of certain skill gaps within the company.

As a businessman with a keen interest in education — he is chairman of Brighton University and the Tavistock Institute — Mr Aldrich knows better than most that plugging such gaps is more difficult than it may appear.

In the days of multi-skilled people working in multi-disciplinary teams "it is not just a question of sending people on a course", he says.

For example, he adds, sales has disappeared as a distinct role to be replaced as a skill. But it is difficult to graft the

IAEL. ALDRICH has a New Year's resolution to create more jobs. It is an unusual decision in these troubled times of "downsizing" and "restructuring" — and all the more so for the head of a computer company.

Mr Aldrich's business is a rate breed — a company that has prospered through a decade of boom and bust. In 1984, the company, ROCC, in West Sussex, marks its 10th anniversary this year with a £5m in the bank — an amount that it expects will grow as a result of a shift in strategy it has been working on for years.

For that it has all been worth. The company employs about 280 people, compared with a peak of 430. But the reason why the firm has been able to weather the changes in the industry successfully is that management has been moving away from manufacturing towards

more services. The company is now in a position to offer a range of technical services, says Keith Bankes, which includes maintenance of computers or all sorts of customers, and many blue chip companies, and systems, headed by Mr Aldrich.

Mr Aldrich, who is increasingly dominated by providing services for large users of computers, such as banks, authorities and government departments.

The hardware services business accounts for about 60 per cent of ROCC's total turnover of £10m. But Mr Aldrich is looking to diversify into the software side taking a 21st-century software company, he said.

Manufacturing now has a reduced role. However, the re-announcement that the firm will go ahead is building some electronics assembly work for one of the contractors on the project.

It is a long way from the time of the company when it was free in 1984 from Rediffusion (the name ROCC stands for Rediffusion's Old Computer parent, BET, decided to concentrate on service businesses and sell off everything

Rediffusion, previously

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Processing solutions

ROCC Computers has launched a strategy on document processing solutions (DPS) for the development of data capture technology and has launched seven DPS products.

The strategy is based on a participative project approach working with users to define and deliver working solutions against cost, time and quality parameters.

ROCC has produced new middleware – the software that sits between the operating system and the final application. It has also developed its own work process improvement methodology, document process re-engineering, to enable users to implement DPS projects.

The company's strategy acknowledges the central role of training and education in bringing the new systems into operation. It has created staff development programmes for clients in order to enable staff to work with the new technologies.

The new products consist of clerical forms processing and document management systems.

The clerical forms processing system is called Seecheck. The document management system is called Rio (ROCC Image Organiser).

Seecheck is middleware and is available in four main versions: Seecheck Intelligent Character Recognition, Seecheck Keyboarding, Seecheck Addressing and Seecheck Images.

Seecheck Images is a mixed scanning and keyboard system aimed at paperless forms data capture.

Seecheck Intelligent Character Recognition is a multi-function neural network

handprint, scanning and keyboarding system.

Seecheck Addressing is for address capture systems and incorporates the UK postal address file, as well as multi-functioning all the other Seecheck characteristics.

Seecheck is available in client/server and Windows configurations.

Rio is document management middleware which incorporates all of Seecheck's forms capabilities. Rio comes in three versions: Document Storage and Retrieval, Document Management and Workflow and Computer Output to Laser Disk.