

Centre-File

For many computer users, a key-to-disk system is simply the latest version of the 80-column card punch-room – more modern technology, but essentially just a means of translating data into a computer-readable format. Such users are probably not deriving the full value from their investment. Key-to-disk systems have, like all other types of computer system, benefitted fully from the rapid development of microminiaturised circuitry, and now come with substantial processing power and extensive software. This allows them to play a more substantial part in an installation's activities than punched card equipment was ever able to do.

An illustration of this point is provided by Centre-file. Centre-file will be a familiar name to many readers; a subsidiary of the National Westminster Bank, it is one of the largest computer service companies in the UK. Turnover this year is expected to exceed £25 million.

One of Centre-file's specialisations is payroll processing. It performs this function for over 2000 companies of all types, ranging from large multinationals, such as Woolworths, down to the smallest businesses. It also handles a considerable amount of financial processing, handling some 45–50% of Stock Exchange transactions and serving over 50 building societies; produces motor vehicle registration statistics for the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT); and performs a typically heterogeneous variety of other data processing tasks.

“... a substantial volume of data preparation ...”

This workload involves a substantial volume of data preparation, for which purpose the company has set up its own data preparation centre. This centre, located in Romford, Essex, runs a total of 700 to 800 data prep jobs per month. Because the workload is characterised by peaks and troughs, a degree of spare capacity exists and around 35% of the work is performed for other customers.

From a management point of view, the data prep operation needs,

**The
Specialist
Data Prep
Bureau
of
National
Westminster
Bank**

by Nicholas Enticknap

first, good productivity to get the work done. Second, it must be reliable. Payroll is probably the most time-critical of all commercial DP applications and it accounts for eight days' solid data entry a month. Third, it is necessary to be able to attract new business to keep the equipment and the operators fully employed.

“... data preparation is a highly competitive market ...”

This is not easy – data preparation is a highly competitive market and every new piece of business is hard to come by. In the nature of things, too, much of it is transitory – helping a customer out when he is overloaded, or perhaps when he has an equipment failure. Where possible, however, a customer once attracted must be retained.

Centre-file is well placed to achieve these objectives. It has large capacity and so can take on big jobs like the keying of stocktaking data. The data prep operators are very experienced – turnover is low and the terms of employment are good.

It has an excellent distribution network ready-made – customers can use any one of the 3000 NatWest bank branches around the country for delivery of documents, or collection of



Pictured outside the Romford offices of Centre-file, manager commercial applications, responsible

results. The data preparation centre itself is in a single location under one roof, which facilitates management control. As a result, management overheads are low, with only four supervisory staff for 80 operators.

To make the most of these advantages, it is important to exploit the full potential of the data preparation equipment. Centre-file uses a Rediffusion Computers' system, with twin processors supporting 63 keystations. The centre manager, Tim Gladstone, testifies enthusiastically to the power of this equipment.

“It is most important for us to be able to offer a full portfolio of facilities to any potential customer. The Rediffusion kit has a lot of standard features built into it which enable us to do this. For example, we are able to save no less than 100 characters keying per employee when setting up a master payroll file by using some of the automatic facilities.

“Creating a database is easy, and can be done more quickly than on many mainframes. This is because of the sophisticated editing features – adding an extra field to a record, for example, is a simple operation.

“The facilities provided also allow us to undertake a number of small data processing applications of our own. We can extract data from a database and analyse it in various



Three Rediffusion BCGs are installed on the first floor of the data preparation centre at Centre-file Romford

Picture shows Pauline Musgrove - operations supervisor and (seated) Angela Gorder - tape controller

them. The highest cost element in such jobs is the systems development and this has to be kept within bounds.

"A typical such job might be the creation of a database of 2000 names and addresses. Using the facilities of the key-to-disk equipment, we can do this sort of job at a very competitive rate. Not only does it keep the equipment working to capacity, but it often creates regular data prep updating work for the future."

As well as allowing an increase in the range of services Centre-file can offer, the Rediffusion equipment also produces excellent productivity figures. The centre is organised in such a way as to maximise productivity, with the need for decision-making kept to an absolute minimum and the emphasis placed on keying speed and accuracy.

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There are 80 operators in all, including part-time staff, working in two shifts. They are motivated by a bonus scheme which starts at an output of 50,000 key depressions a day and works on a sliding scale above that rate. A skilful operator can earn as much as £200 a week. Between them, they produce 70 million key depressions in an average month.

This productivity is obviously important for a high volume data preparation bureau, but it is not the only requirement. You cannot attract the volume of business Centre-file needs by simply offering rapid data preparation throughput. Tailoring the service you offer to the customer's precise requirements is essential and for this purpose the software features of the Rediffusion equipment have proved invaluable.

Left: Tim Gladstone - centre manager and Jim Arthur selling data preparation services

ways. For example, we do a costing analysis on the payroll data we keep for the RAC.

"Many users have relatively small-scale computing requirements where they know what they want, but haven't got the resources to tackle



Sixty-three terminals are installed on two floors at the data preparation centre of Centre-file Ltd Romford. In charge of this bureau is Tim Gladstone - centre manager (right) discussing a work schedule with Pauline Musgrove - operations supervisor