



Peter Smith "...beware of hidden costs"

Computer manager Peter Smith joined CBC in 1979 and has always been associated with information technology services. He is responsible for CBC's Bull 7000/340 mainframe, ROCC 2888 Unix computer, PC computing facilities and three small Novell networks, as well as all the development and conversion work which is done inhouse by a highly experienced IT team. His department is divided up into five segments - management, operations, mainframe development, data preparation and technical support - with all costs being recovered from services supplied.

Crawley's

with a little help
from ROCC

A green and pleasant environment in which to live and work and raise a family - that was one of the promises of the New Towns in post-war Britain and it is certainly a promise which has been faithfully fulfilled by Crawley Borough Council (CBC).

The borough council has always been active in attracting high technology companies to base themselves within its boundaries and has been a leader itself in introducing the latest IT computing to run its day to day business systems.

The swing to 'open systems', of which Peter Smith has fairly strong and sound views, is a computing path that has been well promoted within local government circles, primarily because of the Compulsory Competitive Tendering legislation. Proprietary systems do not always offer the

range of computing solutions and application packages now needed to compete for business against the private sector. Legislation decrees that authorities have to tender for all new contracts. "Hence," said Peter Smith, "the need to look at open systems but beware of hidden costs and Unix machines which have, what I term 'hostile' operating systems. I believe that one can create havoc albeit unwittingly by selecting the wrong type of Unix machine to run in a particular environment."

As he succinctly puts it "a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing."

Initially CBC was only looking to replace its ROCC data capture equipment which had been in use since 1979. It decided to look at both Unix and PC-based solutions but when exploring what was available Peter Smith also took into consideration the personnel who would be operating any new computer system. The operators knew and already trusted the ROCC machine.

"Unless there was some financial reward, change for the sake of change, did not seem to be a good enough reason for going down either a Unix or PC-based route," said Peter Smith.

ROCC submitted to CBC a Unix solution based on a Motorola 88000 processor using ROCC's C-Check II data capture application package and Wyse workstations. The contractual specification required hardware, software and five years maintenance together with all ancillary equipment, such as uninterrupted power supply (UPS).

The exploratory search for a new dp computer coincided with CBC's environmental health services looking at the marketplace. They had outgrown the system they were running and decided to approach a number of suppliers and found an environmental health package they liked from Norsk Data.

ROCC was asked to consider porting this package to the 2888 Unix machine. ROCC responded positively and worked closely with Norsk Data to enable portability of the package with a result

that today the borough is running C-Check II and the environmental health package on the ROCC 2888.

As Peter Smith says: "The cooperation between the two computer suppliers has given us the open systems solution we needed and we are delighted that they worked so well together on this element of the contract."

...a smooth interchange from start to finish

All the data capture conversion work, some 150 formats, was done inhouse by one of council's IT development team. The ROCC 2888 is talking directly to the Bull mainframe - a smooth interchange from start to finish with only one or two minor hiccups.

As more user departments at CBC installed their own desktop computers so the traditional data prep function had become a diminishing one says Peter Smith. C-Check II is used for coping with the bulk input generated by user departments where it is far more practicable to use efficient and skilled dp operators. For example, housing benefits, payment of creditors, certain aspects of the community charge, property maintenance and stores. Payroll for 1000 employees of which around 300 are weekly paid with bonuses and time sheets involved makes it a very time-critical job. The ROCC 2888 also acts as a back-up for the online cash receipting system. Once prime validation e.g. check digit verification, batch totals and so on have been checked within C-Check II the data is transferred electronically to the mainframe 'holding' file from where it is processed as and when it is required to be downloaded to the appropriate systems.

"We have found it quite useful," says Peter Smith, "to transfer data back to the ROCC 2888 machine from the mainframe for error corrections which have been detected, not at source but at a later stage, and these can be easily corrected without the need for contra transactions being

raised by users. We certainly didn't have a problem in getting this connection to work."

CBC committed itself to training its staff in the quickest and most efficient way possible to achieve effective results from the new installation.

Each Wyse terminal has an ergonomically designed professional keyboard. In this instance CBC chose the 029 keypunch layout as the majority of the work is numeric and the operators are more adept at using this style of board. This additional cost has certainly paid off as input speeds are on par with those produced using the old style robust keyboard which was specifically designed to cope with high volume data capture work. Environmental health services chose Amstrad colour PCs, also supplied by ROCC.

Computer systems reliability is of paramount importance to any organisation and the new ROCC 2888's performance reputation has already proved itself to CBC and to the staff who use it on a day to day basis.

"We have found the quality and level of engineering support has been good over the years." Added Peter Smith, "I wouldn't expect anything else from a company certificated with BSI 5750 for both its hardware and software engineering support."

In concluding Peter Smith thinks that the ROCC 2888 Unix computer has certainly benefited the users as it gives them more control over their own systems. It has also given users a level of autonomy whereby they can now look at a wider selection of application packages available from the specialist software houses. However, he does advise them to liaise with the IT department before finally committing themselves, to assess in advance the level of expenditure and conversion work which may have to be done before a package can be ported. Peter Smith is a firm believer in the exchange of dialogue between users and IT in order to cement a good working relationship and this has proved to be successful at Crawley Borough Council. □