

THE PERIPATETIC OFFICE

In spite of having conceived some of the ideas behind today's office automation techniques and developed some of the most advanced products, I must confess to having had some misgivings about how and where office automation would actually work. A lifetime in the computer industry with its constant hype has made me wary of greeting new fads with any enthusiasm.

But office automation was different if only because we didn't believe the hype and we had decided to do it in a different and, as it turned out, unique way. The actual products we invented, Telecentres and Teleputers, are now well known and very successful. This particular story however is about my own, personal peripatetic office - where I use those products.

Firstly, the problem that I had was basically that I had acquired a number of jobs in private, public and professional life for a variety of reasons. Some of the jobs were very taxing, most of them were unpaid and I enjoyed them all. The possibility of dispensing with some of the jobs did not enter my mind. To the contrary, there were many other things that I wanted to find time to do. Thus I was like a juggler trying to add more and more balls. Improved dexterity, timing and concentration could help to a degree but what I needed most was a total re-organization.

I started with an excellent secretary and then addressed the problem of my peripatetic office. Basically, I have three offices, one at home in Sussex, one at our Sussex headquarters and one in London. In any single day I use all three offices - except if I am out of the country. My secretary is located at the Sussex headquarters.

I needed to have all my office facilities in three places, and I needed a communications system while travelling between them. The communications system in the car was easily solved with a car mobile radio. The multi-office facilities were a little more difficult.

At any office, I needed to be able to process all incoming communications, examine and if necessary up-date my diary/schedules, send messages to anyone anywhere, quickly find information on performance and projections of the business and not to be hassled by never being able to locate people on the telephone. Finally, I needed a system that worked 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and didn't take holidays or get sick.

When the system arrived it didn't seem very sci-fi. It was called ADVISOR - after the know-all guru on the 'Jimmy Young Show' - and it was a 'management support system'. I didn't need support. I needed help but the system was too charitable to mention it.

One terminal was installed on both of my work offices' desks and a third went on a pine teleputer table on wheels (a piece of pine and wheeled TV stand that I had designed myself) so that I could work it from my favourite two seater-settee at home in my study. The facilities turned out better than expected. Besides the desired functions already mentioned, the system had document handling (find a document by various keys etc), jotter, multiple files (pending, in/out), a run-your-own computer program facility, an electronic waste-bin and datacommunications connections to many computers including PRESTEL. There was also local computing, floppy disks and a printer. Everything on the screen was techni-colour and it turned out to be a joy to use.

There were a couple of snags. I refused to have any training in how to use 'it'. I thought that if 'it' didn't understand how I worked that was it's problem. We had to compromise eventually, or at least we came to an understanding. I agreed that the way 'it' did it was logical and 'it' agreed that I was in charge. I haven't had any training. I don't want any and I won't read the manual 'it' produced one particularly acrimonious afternoon.

The other snag concerned my wife and my diary. I had given up carrying a personal diary years ago when I failed to receive one at Xmas. As a wanderer without a diary, the only place to find out where I was going was from the diary my secretary kept at headquarters. With a reasonable memory I could remember my business engagements for a week or so at a time without difficulty. But of course I could never remember social or school engagements and unfortunately holidays were a total blind-spot. So, as you have probably guessed, I have put my wife on the system. She can browse through my diary and organise our family life. After 21 years of marriage she can now find out where I am and what I am doing.

My peripatetic office is part of my life. I can't remember how I managed before. I take for granted the round-the-clock services that my ADVISOR provides. I have become better organised, more disciplined and more productive. A wandering way of life doesn't mean that you have to be out of touch. And a busy life doesn't mean that you are always under pressure. And now I know that the new technology really does help.

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