UK Underwriter brings Telex to the desk top via a unique minicomputer link

Telex – that oft-promoted but generally under-used alternative to phone or post – has been brought bang up to date in the most user-friendly of systems through a unique marriage with an existing Rediffusion minicomputer system at American International Underwriters (UK) Ltd. The new system, which has been fully operational since December, makes every employee his or her own telex operator, but without the hassle.

AIU, the UK subsidiary of multinational insurance giant American International Group Inc. has made telex a genuinely personal, immediate and simple means of communication while actually REDUCING overall costs by about 15 per cent. They have done it by combining an advanced telex message switching system with their existing in-house network of minicomputer screens. What it means is that virtually every employee, whether based in AIU's Croydon or City of London offices, has direct access to full telex facilities via screens already in regular daily use.

"As far as we know, it is the first time that complete telex message switching, both incoming and outgoing, has been linked through an independent minicomputer system," says Richard Hann, business information manager for AIU. "Other users have linked messages in one direction, but not both."

Reaction to the system from within the company has been very positive, Hann adds. Despite initial doubts about individuals having to send their own telexes, it has proved so quick and easy to use that telex traffic has actually risen, to approximately 130 messages in and out per day. Costs are nevertheless lower, according to Hann.

"First, we have saved on staff costs, because we now need only a telex supervisor instead of four dedicated telex operators," he says "Second, the system technology ensures that telexes sent make optimum use of transmission time,
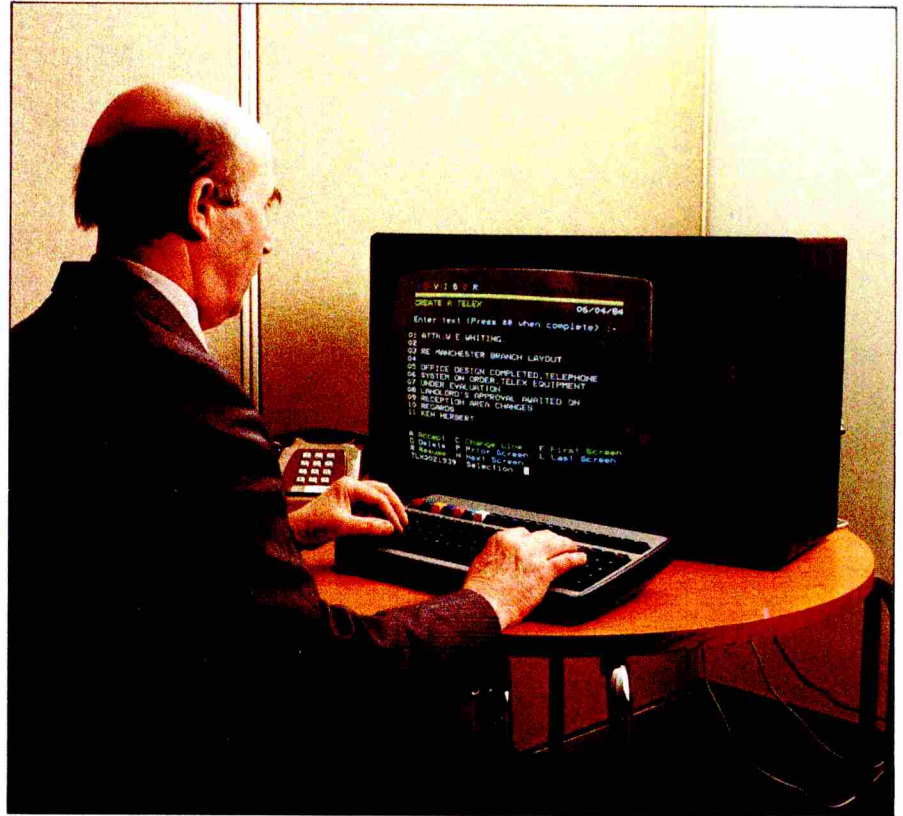
Ken Herbert – company secretary, American International Underwriters (UK) Ltd, is pictured creating a telex via the ADVISOR telex system using a Rediffusion videotex television

unlike many manually generated telexes, and reduces the incidence of errors. Third, an increasing proportion of telexes appear to be replacing communications that would normally have gone by telephone or letter, both of which are more expensive overall."

". . . a boon to managers . . ."

In particular, Hann says, the system has been a boon to managers who frequently have to communicate out of normal office hours with American International offices in the US and over 100 other countries around the world. For them the old telex department was often shutting down just when business activity was reaching its peak.

AIU first started looking seriously at ways of improving its telex and other communications systems in

1982, when it was already three years into using its Rediffusion mini system for a wide range of data entry and end user DP functions. These had involved the installation of 12 terminals in AIU's City of London office, and another 22 in its large Croydon premises, linked to twin R2830 systems alongside the company's IBM 4341 mainframes.

"We looked at a variety of alternatives, including dedicated message switching systems with their own network of screens," Hann says. "To establish two independent systems for both locations would have been too expensive, and no one appeared able to offer a single dedicated system that could link both offices. Even if such a system did exist, it would require the installation of a complete set of dedicated operator screens, wasting space and the familiarity already built up with the Rediffusion Mark III terminals. We