The Making of Seecheck

Paul Sinden, product manager of ROCC Forms and Document Processing Solutions looks at how the latest SEECHECK® range of products evolved.

In the late 1980s, ROCC reviewed its product development programmes to identify the future products for the Millenium – products that could become 'de facto' standards worldwide. The review started from the viewpoint that business information systems would not disappear but that they would have to change. The 1980s so-called office automation revolution had succeeded only in creating more paper and more jobs in paper processing. (By the early 1990s jobs in administration totalled over half of the US workforce).

...even more paper and forms

The developments of telecommunications and computers provided the wherewithal to cut paper usage but the exponential growth in application of computers to new tasks was providing ever more new paper forms and documents. A formalised methodology for processing forms and documents quickly, cheaply and simply would have universal appeal.

The starting point had to be techniques for Work Process Improvement. Organisational change in the 1980s had blurred the cost profiles of many administrative processes to such a degree that it was nigh impossible to cost the processing of a particular form or document. Departmental costs were easier to establish but they covered myriads of different activities. Because clerical staff generally did not fill in timesheets it was difficult to see where the labour hours were spent and the anecdotal evidence of time assignment that was forthcoming was highly misleading. For forms processing costing was made even more problematical by forms crossing departmental boundaries during their processing lives.

...getting light shed upon forms processing costs

There was a major cultural problem in getting any light whatsoever shed upon forms processing costs. As a director of one large insurance company said, "We don't have a problem with claims processing. We have hundreds of people doing it. Why improve work processes if there isn't a problem?"

The economic recession of 1990-93 and the globalisation of competition that accompanied it coincided with the ideas of business process re-engineering (BPR) being hyped by interested parties. Notwithstanding the provenance, BPR provoked management into examining the whys and hows of their business processes. Work Process Improvement specifically is about how not why. Simple analytical tasks like costing the processing of a form using activity-based costing revealed alarming statistics. One organisation that had moved their forms processing from a central production-oriented facility to administrative departments had quadrupled the cost and reduced the accuracy by 20% creating all kinds of consequential and uncostable problems with no discernible compensating benefits. The original rationale for the change was empowerment of administrative employees to reduce staff turnover and improve customer service. The recession reduced the staff turnover and they had to set up a separate customer service department to rectify the problems they had created by reducing accuracy levels.

...a document processing solution

ROCC developed an approach called "Document Process Re-engineering" aimed at analysing, understanding and improving document processing. From this approach it developed a two-part product strategy. Firstly, to attack the forms processing problem using new technology to remove labour content and improve

accuracy. This became the SEECHECK product. Secondly, to standardise, rationalise and simplify document processing into its basic components; capture (via SEECHECK), store and retrieve, manage (pages, folders, cabinets, etc.) and route (workflow). The resulting product became RIO (ROCC's Image Organiser).

...emerging technologies in scanning

For the first time, there would be a vertically integrated straight-through system that would handle all aspects of forms and document processing. ROCC called it DPS – a document processing solution.
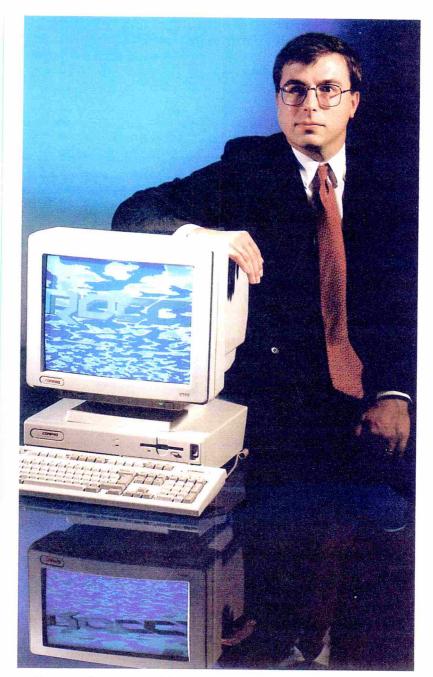
The next challenges were to put DPS into worldware working environments – UNIX, MS-DOS, Windows, Novell, Informix – and build in support for all the emerging technologies in scanning, recognition and networking.

...retreated to cost containment as a viable objective

The final piece of the jigsaw was to re-visit the marketplace with in-depth market research to ensure that the implementation of the strategy matched all the originally defined needs. There was a surprisingly good match. The interesting things about the later research were that operational managers had become pessimistic about cost reduction and had retreated to cost containment as a viable objective, which wasn't too surprising when they also revealed that costs were rising by 5% – 10% per annum.

...new horizons are being explored

In October 1994, after a period of selling and installing components of DPS, the full approach was publicly announced. Lead customers who had installed the first components without knowing that there were further modules to come, received the announcement with great satisfaction and the new horizons are

Sinden: "...the workhorse of the decade"

now being explored.

The interest generated by the new ROCC products has been overwhelming both in the UK and overseas. The products address real-life problems, deliver impressive performance and reliability and are easy-to-use.

...a byword for quality

ROCC chose to use the name SEECHECK for the forms processing product for a number of reasons: The name is a registered trade name, the original SEECHECK product had revolu-

tionised forms processing, then called data entry, in the 1970s, the original product had taught an army of computing professionals how to use high level procedural programming languages in a real-time environment, and the original product had become a byword for quality. As someone once said, "If only 25% of investment in computers in the last decade has shown any measurable return to the investors, ROCC must be the 25% leader and SEECHECK must be the workhorse of the decade."

We hope the new SEECHECK over time will win the same levels of approval and affection?