



RISOTTO ON THE DAILY MENU FOR COMPUTER CENTRE STAFF

The West Midlands Regional Health Authority is, in geography and population, much the same sort of size as a country like Denmark. It is the largest employer in the West Midlands and the biggest spender.

It takes about 83,000 staff and £19 million a week to run the region's health services that range from a district nurse visiting the elderly in their homes to teams of doctors and nurses supported by modern technology in large hospitals.

The authority plans to spend £820 million on new buildings and equipment over a ten-year period, but because of uncertainty surrounding revenue funding, as well as increased pressure on existing services, it has adopted a 'strategy for change with unchanged resources'.

Computer systems have an important part to play in ensuring the success of a policy that, across the region as a whole, is constantly on the look-out for efficiency savings.

"The traditional ways of data processing are changing fairly dramatically. We wish to stay in business, so we're changing the way we do things." Peter Owen whose title as regional customer services manager masks the full nature of his job running the computer centre for the West Midlands Regional Health Authority, is currently face to face with a year of major change.

Whereas, previously, the computer centre provided its services to the region's 22 health districts and

other NHS organisations administered by the authority in return for a fixed sum, 'top sliced' from departmental budgets, it is now, from April 1, charging directly for everything from time on its two ICL 2966 mainframes to data prep by key depressions.

At the same time, the centre is having to cope with a number of major new systems development projects ranging from a rewrite of the SAS health service accounting system, which is supported by the West Midlands for use by all regional authorities, to a VME version of the child health system and the prospect next year of a new payroll system. Added to this, the region has developed a major patient

Peter Owen (above) can monitor the use of stationery and other consumables across 52 weeks on a single videotex screen. The one page shows each item, the current supplier, unit costs, stock, current order and delivery positions and, where appropriate, calculates average weekly use.

administration system, which is now going into the districts, and it has also recently set up a new customer services operation.

"We're in the process of converting all our major corporate systems from batch to the online world of database and transaction processing software. That requires a change of attitude," said Owen who, in his own way, is leading from the front and introducing new technology and new ways of doing things within the operations under his immediate control.

One word sums up Owen's attitude:

RISOTTO. Not to put too fine a point on it, RISOTTO is on the daily menu at the West Midlands RHA by courtesy of Peter Owen.

RISOTTO stands for the heavily contrived 'Regional Information System for Online Terminal Television Operation'. What it is is a videotex system that has been in development over the past four years or so and that is now coming into its own both as an information and operational control system. And it's taking the West Midlands RHA down the road towards the electronic office of the future.

Owen and his team were among the first organisations to fasten onto the then Rediffusion Computers', now ROCC's, 'office revolution' concepts that came to the market in 1980. They bought one of the early videotex systems to explore what they saw as exciting possibilities and to do some development work. Some 18 months ago they went a step further and took on board ROCC's standard ADVISOR software and used it as the basis for their own developments, building in some of the software they had written themselves.

The team's main interest in the ADVISOR software lay in its potential as a communications medium. "We saw that it would be very advantageous to set up a system that would enable all parts of the organisation to communicate easily with each other," he commented. The concepts of an electronic diary and electronic messaging were now firmly established within the West Midlands region, he said.

Owen's organisation is split between two main sites: the main ICL mainframe computer centre at Harborne and a mix of computer equipment at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Edgbaston. Terminals at these locations, including one in the new customer services section at Harborne, are used to keep the organisation in close contact.

It's now expected that key staff – some 25 to 30 people – keep their diaries on the system so that they can be contacted at any time. Many of them, like Owen himself, spend a lot of time out of the office, but they are encouraged to check into the system at one or more times during the day to update their diaries and to pick up messages.

"Computer systems have an important part to play . . ."

"The organisation is so dispersed now that we couldn't exist without this kind of facility," Owen commented.

It's now a simple matter for him to schedule a meeting of his managers. He can see their commitments at a glance and he can put a message out on the system to call them together, saving on time and frustration. It may be a touch autocratic to do it this way, Owen acknowledges, but it's the only really efficient way to operate. "Most of the things we're responsible for call for immediate action. We don't have the luxury of waiting around to suit everyone's convenience. We have to get the job done," he said.

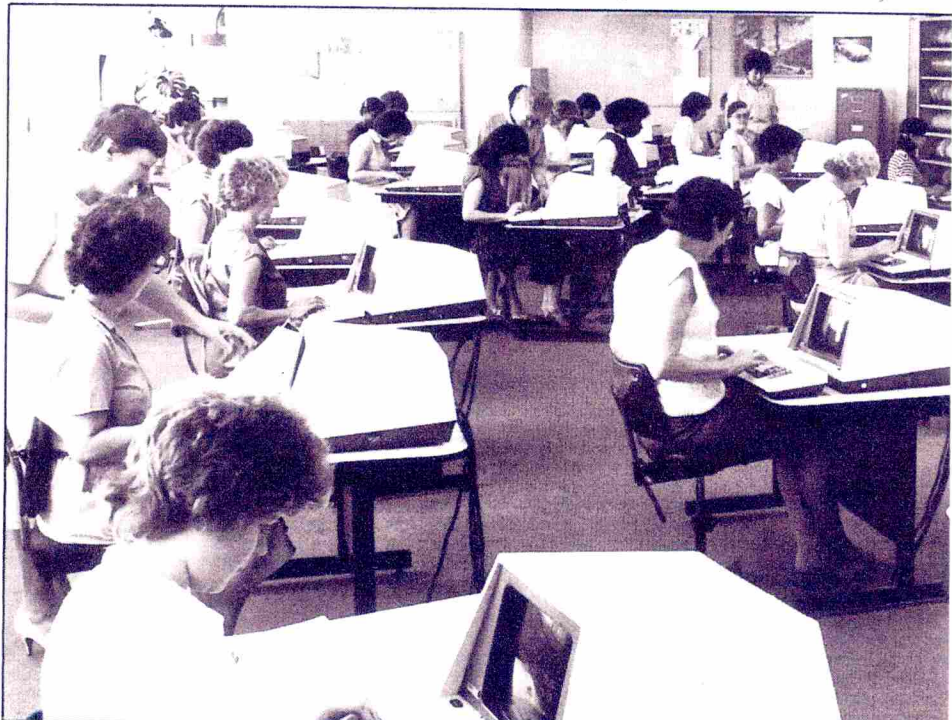
Owen also finds the 'jotter' facility within ADVISOR to be useful to him personally. He has got into the habit of using it, so that the system comes up with reminders of things that have to be done.

He likes the messaging system also because he can set it up in such a way that people have to respond, so he knows for sure that the particular message has actually been read and digested.

Owen has some reservations about other aspects of the 'paperless office'. The whole area of document management, he feels, has some way to go before the technical problems and the people problems are overcome. "It still takes an inordinate amount of disk space to store textual information and there are still a lot of people for whom displays are alien," he commented. To Owen and to the younger generation coming into offices, it's second nature to read everything off display screens, but there is still resistance among office workers at large that will only go away with time, he suggests.

The videotex system is used in a number of other applications, all of which have brought important benefits to the operation of the West Midlands computer centre. The centre's work schedules are monitored and controlled through six videotex screens. The schedules are keyed into the system and, as work arrives at the centre, its progress is followed from terminals at each stage – data control input, data prep, tape library, operations, data control output and, finally, when work is collected and booked out of the computer centre.

At any time progress can be checked by enquiring from the terminals by scheduled date or by



The electronic office may be just around the corner, but in the meantime the routine work of a busy computer centre goes on. Data prep at the West Midlands RHA is handled by a twin R800/70 installation with 30 keystations.

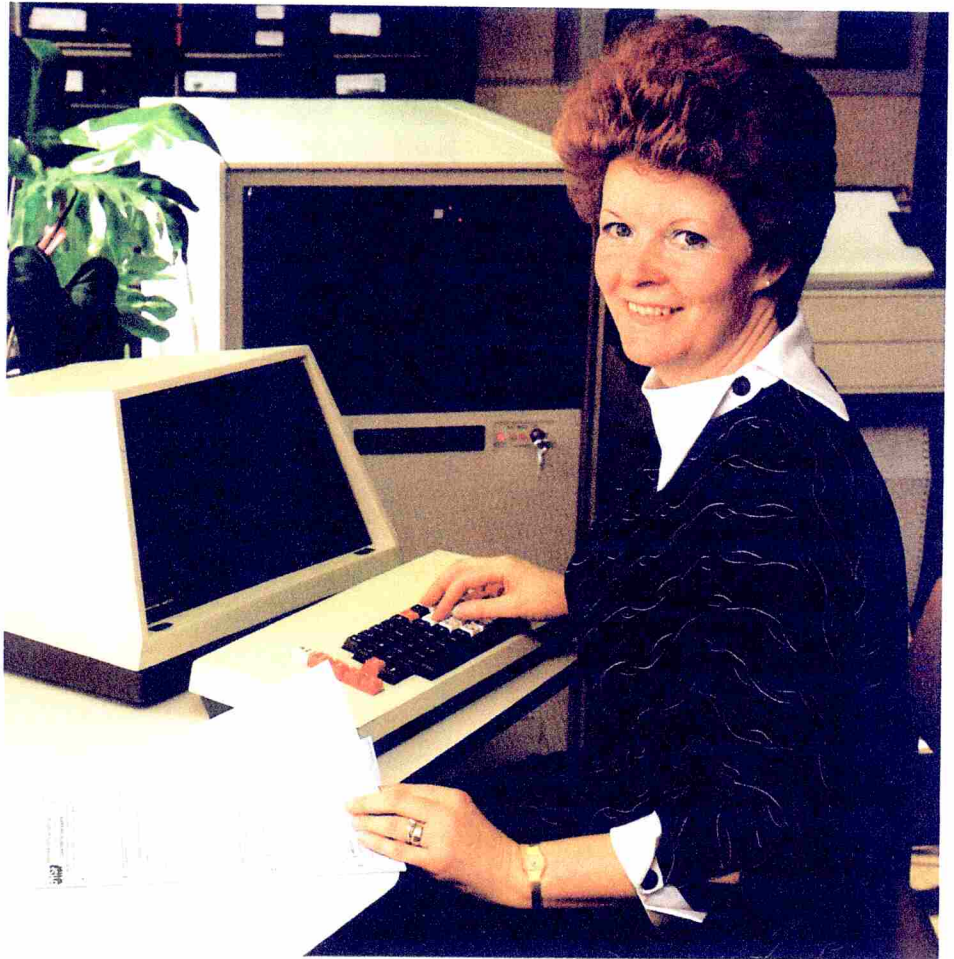
area district. The system allows centre management to search and list out all work that is running late, or simply to list work that is scheduled for a particular day and what was actually booked in. It will also run off analysis prints, giving turn-round times and the like.

The videotex system is used also as a presentation tool. West

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Midlands staff have written some software that takes ROCC's Prestel look-alike TPages and links them together such that a basic library of presentation screens can be selected and joined together in sequences to suit particular audiences. Not only is this a more efficient way to put together a presentation, videotex, in West Midlands' experience, also has more visual impact than slide presentations.

The centre has also found some smaller, but nonetheless appealing uses for the RISOTTO videotex system. For instance, 300 people work at the Harborne centre, but there are only 40 car parking spaces in the building which means that people can get blocked in quite easily. In the past they had to go to reception and search through a card index; now they just key in the offending car number and the videotex system throws up the name of the car owner



West Midlands RHA was the first organisation to use ROCC's R1800 as a convenient way of getting payroll information straight into the BACS systems. It can handle OMR equipment as well as other media. Pictured is Carol Owen, data preparation manager.

and the extension number.

A more recent addition to the RISOTTO menu and a more mainstream application which Owen believes has considerable potential throughout the regional health authority is a budget system that Owen has built for his own use.

Owen's budget to run the computer centre is around £1.5 million. The budget system he has set up according to expenditure codes and cost centres. Through the year as orders are placed and as invoices come in they are keyed into the system and, in the event of any overspend, it is immediately highlighted on the screen in red. The system can throw up a series of basic budget display screen and print out reports. "The important thing to me is that the system has been geared around me as a budget manager and not to provide the treasurer with information that he then passes to me, possibly some weeks later," Owen commented. "The advantage it gives me is up-to-the-day budgeting control as an important management function," he said.

The system, which runs alongside other financial systems of

the regional authority, could be made available to budget managers in other areas, he added. Given the financial constraints under which the NHS has to operate, the system has obvious attractions in enabling management to monitor expenditures which, across the West Midlands RHA, amount to over £900 million a year. Not many organisations have that sort of money to spend or the potential rewards that could flow from tight budgeting control.

It's a fair statement that the RISOTTO project is putting many of the concepts of the electronic office into practice. In some respects they have been found wanting, but Owen and his group have a vision of the future and have gone as far as most people into turning this into reality. The world so far has yet to beat a path to the door of the West Midlands RHA computer centre, but to anyone who has tried to navigate south of Birmingham to Harborne that will not seem surprising. The interest within the NHS is there and it may be just a matter of time before other regional health authorities take note of the pioneering work that's going on there.

