
CHARLES CHRISTIAN'S

LEGAL TECHNOLOGY

INSIDER

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO WHAT'S HOT (AND WHAT'S NOT) IN LAW OFFICE SYSTEMS

IN THIS EDITION...

- Total recall at Land Registry... 2
- Alternative angle on software pricing... 3
- 1996 Diary of legal IT events... 4
- Software for the Macintosh men... 6

STOP PRESS

The announcement of the winner of the Society for Computers & Law award for 'the most outstanding application of IT to the law' will be made on the evening of Monday 5th February at the Law Society in London. More details next time.

ELECTRONIC LEGAL FORMS WAR HOTS UP

Just two months after the Solicitors' Law Stationery Society finally made its appearance in the electronic legal forms market with OyezForms, current market leader Laserform Law has seriously upped the ante by the acquisition of another legal software house and promises of further major product initiatives in the months to come...

During the Christmas/New Year break, Laserform completed the purchase of the Kestrel Accounts software package from Wheatsheaf Professional Systems. This is the low-cost Windows (and DOS) legal accounts and time recording system for smaller firms that was developed just over two years ago by legal IT consultants David Salway and Graham Irwin.

Laserform managing director Barry Green says Kestrel was an excellent product to begin with - which was why his company acquired it - but promises it will be even better by the end of January, following a number of enhancements.

These include changing the screen layout to the standard Microsoft design; implementing a number of suggestions made by the Law Society's Monitoring Unit (new reports, more narrative on the cheque issuing side and changes to the deposit interest calculator); and - most importantly of all - making the whole system compatible with Microsoft's Access database.

Details of the new pricing structure will be released later this month but Barry Green has also hinted Kestrel ➤

➤ will play a major role in a new electronic forms marketing initiative aimed at smaller firms that will be launched later in the spring.

In March, Laserform will also be launching its 'next generation' of electronic forms - the 'Intelliforms' range - which the company believes will reduce the typing element in form filling by around 90 percent. Further major announcements are planned for June, when Laserform will be exhibiting at the Solicitors & Legal Office Exhibition at the Barbican.

In the meantime, with nearly 80 of the UK's Top 100 law firms already using Laserform products and another 10 actively evaluating them, Barry Green feels that the Oyez challenge has so far failed to make much of an impact.

"I have always been confident about the technical quality of our products and if it comes to price, then like John Lewis, we will never knowingly be undersold," says Green.

☞ **Comment...** With the old Kedge forms business acquired by Oyez and Compuforms apparently doing nothing very much, control of the electronic legal forms marketplace now looks set to be a three-cornered fight between Laserform, Oyez and the Printaform range from Peapod Professional (formerly Xios Systems).

Although trailing some way behind Laserform in terms of market share, Peapod's Ian Wimbush is still very bullish about the future and promises that if there is a price war, Printaform is in a position to beat all-comers on price. Peapod also has not ruled out the expansion option, possibly through the acquisition of a legal accounts software house. ☐

BUSINESS IS ACE

Legal systems supplier ACE (☎ 0171-404 5577) reports that 12 sets of barristers chambers ordered the new Infinity system during the last three months of 1995. The company is predicting a 10% increase in turnover to £2million in the current trading year to March 1996.

ESSEX WANT WINDOWS

Essex County Council is using the SolCase Windows-based conveyancing system from Solicitec (☎ 0113-278 7757) as the foundation for developing a number of case management applications that will be used by the authority's legal services division. The Council is also testing Solicitec time recording software.

JERSEY TO COMPUTERISE LAND REGISTRY

The States of Jersey has awarded a contract worth £500,000 to Kinesis Computing to supply the Land Registry with a document management system to keep track of records which date back to 1600 and that, prior to 1984, were still written in French.

Commenting on the order, Ian Le Marquand, Judicial Greffier (ie registrar) of Jersey said: "What takes a researcher half a day at the moment, could take as little as half an hour with this system. The sort of savings there could be in the conveyancing process will far outweigh the cost of the system".

☞ **Technical Note...** The current public search facilities will be replaced by a new 'Total Recall' system supplied by Kinesis Computing (☎ 01793-536291) that will be used primarily by lawyers acting in conveyancing matters. The new system will allow Registry information to be searched on the basis of key names, dates or page references. Where the exact name is unknown 'wildcards' and 'sounds-like' searches can be carried out. □

ALRIGHT ON THE NIGHT

Alexis Byter's worries about how computer systems will cope with the change of century at the end of the decade, when the year 1999 gives way to 2000 (☞ see *Issue No 5* for full story) prompted a helpful response from Alan Thompson of legal systems supplier **Thompson Moore Associates** (☎ 01276-452070).

He says 21st Century dates should at least not cause any problems for users of modern fourth generation language (4GL) based systems and cites the example of PROGRESS, the 4GL used by TMA in its applications software.

This has a date storage, calculation and comparison system based on the number of days since 0 BC and so ➔

➔ theoretically can handle any date in the range 01/01/32768 BC through to 31/12/32767 AD - which should be enough to keep any auditor happy.

☞ **Comment...** By way of a footnote to the last edition's story about Windows 95 versus Windows NT dilemma, the suppliers of PROGRESS apparently also advise developers not to move to a Windows NT platform until Release 3.6 (which starts beta testing in the second part of this year) is launched as they do not regard the current offering as stable enough to support enterprise wide systems.

Thompson's own view, based on TMA briefing meetings with Microsoft, is that Windows 95 will eventually emerge as the standard operating platform for smaller firms, while larger practices (ie Top 500) will find NT more appropriate. □

QUILL THRILLS

In common with ACE (see *separate story*) the closing months of 1995 also saw **Quill Computer Systems** (☎ 0161-236 2910) enjoying healthy sales, winning a total of over £100,000 in orders from both existing users and new customers.

Existing Quill users Bishop & Sewell in central London are installing Quantum accounts together with Microsoft Office on a new 14-user Pentium network; while Butters David Grey in Hastings are upgrading to a multiuser accounting system and introducing conveyancing software; and Ralph C Yablon in Bradford is adding case management for debt collection to its portfolio.

New customers include: Paterson Bateman in Beverley, who are installing a network running quantum, conveyancing and wordprocessing; Rowlands in Manchester and Lucas Rogerson in Ashton-under-Lyne, who have ordered wordprocessing; while Harris Mitchell in Bristol, Turner & Co in Wolverhampton and Metcalfe Wright & Platt in Manchester have ordered integrated accounting and time recording systems. □

NEW PRICE DEAL TO BOOST USE

One of the perennial problems facing smaller firms wanting to expand their fee earners' use of practice client and matter records, is that a relatively small increase in the number of people concurrently accessing computer files can result in a major hike in database multiuser licence fees.

And it is no use complaining to the suppliers of specialist legal systems about this as often they have very little discretion on pricing matters but are instead compelled with the licence 'bands' imposed by third-party database and network server software suppliers.

So, for example, if a firm want to move from a 10-user to an 11-user installation, instead of a 10% increase in the overall licence fee, there may well be a 100% increase, as the licensing structure moves up from, say, a 6-10 user to an 11-25 user bracket.

Not surprisingly, many firms balk at the prospect of all this additional expenditure and defer expansion of access to the network. Unfortunately, this in turn has the knock-on effect of restricting the flow of information around the office, with the result that valuable management and practice development data can often remain locked away from fee earners in the accounts department.

In an attempt to encourage greater use of data resources and to make a firm's information more available to fee earners and their secretaries, **Cognito Software** (☎ 01363-775582) has devised an alternative pricing structure based on an annual per-user rental fee.

Although Cognito's legal software range is still subject to a one-off fee governed by pre-set server licence bands (as well as an annual support/maintenance contract) the actual application software is supplied on a sliding scale of rental charges. Thus for 1-5 users the fee is £200 per user (ie £600 for 3 users, £800 for 4 users etc) falling to £150 per user ➡

➡ for the 6-10 users bracket, £100 per user in the 11-25 users brackets and £75 per user in the 26+ bracket.

Although the new formula does need a bit of thinking about, Chris Poulson of Cognito reckons that for smaller firms it should reduce their annual software bill by between at £2000 and £3000 a year – a saving which could then go towards buying new hardware for the additional users.

Price however is not everything and Poulson believes the main benefit is that it will help encourage firms to use the information at their disposal, instead of just having it sitting unused on a computer's database. □

TWO NEW IT DIRECTORIES

Two new directories aimed specifically at the legal technology market have just been published.

At the end of November VNU Business Publications' Database Division published the **IT Legal Guide** (price £45, 160 pages, ISBN 0-86271-187-8). This is a comprehensive directory of some 300 software products plus technology suppliers and information sources (including on-line services and CD-ROM titles) covering just about every aspect of the UK legal systems market. It also contains extensive keyword and A-Z indexes plus cross-reference tables. (Available from Book-sales Department, VNU House, ☎ 0171-316 9628).

The second guide – published this week – is the **ILCA Listed Legal Software Suppliers Pocket Guide 1996** (price £15 + VAT, 85 pages). This is the second edition of the Institute of Legal Cashiers & Administrators' directory and – reflecting its provenance – is heavily slanted towards accounts and practice management products for solicitors practices. Instead of cross-reference tables, it opts for 'tick-box' product information entries, so you can see at a glance what each supplier has to offer. (Available from ILCA, DX: 32501, ☎ 0181-294 2887). □

FINGER ON THE BUTTON

The Irish-based ALPS Electric group (☎ 00-353-29-70677) has produced a desktop version of its GlidePoint touch-pad system, which provides an alternative to the conventional mouse used with graphical user interfaces. It retails for £65 + VAT in the UK and is compatible with OS/2, Mac and all Windows systems.

OK FOR WINDOWS

Printer manufacturer OKI Systems (☎ 01753-819819) has launched a 3 page per minute colour inkjet, targeted at professionals who need to be able to print colour documents and OHP slides etc for presentations and business meetings. Called the OKIJET 2010, the printer is fully Windows compatible and has an RRP of £340 + VAT.

SOFTWARE FOR SOLICITORS

March 6-7 sees the Software for Solicitors show arrive at the Bristol Marriott Hotel (12.00 to 19.00 Wednesday, 10.00 to 17.00 Thursday). Nearly a score of the UK's leading legal systems suppliers will be present. The show will visit Leeds and Birmingham in the autumn.

THE BARBICAN EXHIBITION

With over 100 exhibitors, the annual Solicitors & Legal Office Exhibition held at the Barbican in London is the UK's premier legal IT event. This year the doors open at 9.30 on Tuesday 4th June and close at 17.00 on the 6th. LTI will carry a full preview.

Admission to both exhibitions is free and for further details contact the organisers Truemist ☎ 0181-742 3399).

WHAT'S ON IN 1996 ?

It is only January but already the calendar of legal technology events is starting to fill up. If you have an event you think will be of interest to readers, contact the LTI office.

☎ 17 January - **Legal Issues on the Internet & Other Online Services.** Society for Computers & Law + BCS joint meeting. From 18.00, Godfrey Thomson Hall, Moray House Institute of Education, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh (Call SCL on ☎ 0117-923 7393 or via LINK).

☎ 22-24 January - **LegalTech New York.** The largest of the American legal IT exhibitions. There is also a seminar program. From 10.00, New York Hilton. (Call Corporate Presentations on ☎ 001-212-877 5619). ☞ **Note...** The LegalTech event will also take place at other locations in the US throughout 1996: Los Angeles **24-26 June**, Atlanta **25-27 September** and Chicago **6-8 November**.

☎ 31 January - **Developing Legal Practice Using Telecommunications.** One day conference with exhibition. Has strong Internet flavour and speakers include consultants Delia Venables and Neil Cameron on the technicalities, as well as practitioners like Fox Williams partner Nigel Miller talking about his firm's use of the Net. From 9.15, Harrington Lecture Theatre, University of Central Lancashire, Preston. Conference fee £125 + VAT - carries 5 hours CPD credits. (Call Jane Johnson on ☎ 01772-892253).

☎ 15 February 1996 - **Current Issues in Data Protection.** Society for Computers & Law Northern Branch meeting. (Call SCL on ☎ 0117-923 7393 or via LINK). ☞ **Note...** The SCL have a number of other events planned for 1996, including the annual lecture and the announcement of the winner of the IT award. Their dates will be reported in LTI.

☎ 12-13 February - **Aim Computer Users Association Conference.** The ACUA's annual event at The Belfry, speakers on IT topics include Richard Suskind from Masons and LTI editor Charles Christian. Seminar sessions carry CPD credits. (Call ACUA secretary Roger Hancock on ☎ 01789-296096).

☎ 21 February - **Norwel User Group Meeting.** London. Topic to be finalised. (Call Deborah Stevenson at Norwel on ☎ 0161-945 3511).

☎ 27-28 February - **Information Systems for Lawyers.** The Lawyer's 8th annual conference and exhibition at the London Marriott Hotel. Formal sessions (chaired by Masons IT director Martin Telfer) start at 9.30. Topics covered include voice activated systems and video conferencing, the Internet, migrating to Windows and on-line time recording. Speakers include David Albert of Ashurst Morris Crisp, Doug McLachlan of Axxia, Richard Susskind, Andrew Levison of the David Andrews Partnership, and Clive Whitfield-Jones of Jeffrey Green Russell. Conference fee £650 + VAT - carries 10 hours CPD credits. (Call Centaur Conferences on ☎ 0171-434 3711).

☎ 28 February - **The Shape of Things to Come.** The Institute of Legal Cashiers & Administrators annual law office IT awareness day at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens. Exhibition starts 9.30, seminar sessions chaired by Charles Christian, topics include the Net, video conferencing and multimedia. Fee £125 + VAT - carries 5 hours CPD credits. (Call ILCA on ☎ 0181-294 2887).

☎ 23-26 April 1996 - **COMDEX/UK.** The Las Vegas COMDEX/Fall event is the world's largest IT show. This year a spin-off makes its debut at Earl's Court, London. Substantial discounts on admission charges available by registering early. (For details call ☎ 01203-694131 or check <http://www.comdex.com>).

SPREADING CD-ROMS ACROSS THE PRACTICE

Although the longer term structure of legal publishing is likely to be determined by online delivery services like the Internet, for at least the immediate future the most popular electronic format looks set to be CD-ROM.

Indeed with growing numbers of PCs now being sold with integral CD-ROM drives and all the major legal publishing houses producing editions on disk, 1996 looks like being a boom year for the format.

However, this success is in turn creating a fresh problem, namely: how do you disseminate the contents of a CD title to all the people who need to access it within a firm without either buying multiple copies? Or else having a 'runner' from the library going from office to office collecting up and handing out disks - in much the same way as the tea-trolley lady of old used to dispense cups of tea?

One company specialising in the technology to address this problem is **Bluepoint Business Systems**, (☎ 0181-391 4488) who combine CD 'jukeboxes' with network software, so that all users on the network can have concurrent access within approximately five seconds to any CD-ROM loaded on the jukebox. (The network software also includes a licence metering facility to monitor the usage of individual disk titles.)

Firms like Clyde & Co, Baker McKenzie, Olswangs and Dallas Brett are already using Bluepoint's 'network CD towers' (the disks and disk drives are stacked in a vertical cabinet). Each tower can hold 14 titles - although it is possible to 'daisy chain' towers together so that up to a maximum of 1280 disks can be accessed simultaneously.

This may seem like overkill, given that at the moment there are probably only about a dozen legal titles on CD-ROM that most firms would want to ➔

➔ access. However Bluepoint's commercial director Bob Lewis points out that in practise the distribution of publications is only one of three uses for CD towers.

The others being: the distribution of applications software and - perhaps more importantly for the legal profession - the dissemination of database information. This can be both third-party material (BT's Directory Enquiries disk is very popular) and in-house produced, such as document images generated by a litigation support system.

☞ **Technical Note...** The latest version of the software - developed by Logicraft in the USA and distributed by Bluepoint in the UK - supports both Windows and DOS and will run across a wide range of LAN (local area network) and WAN (wide area network) protocols. ☐

ENGLISH AS IT IS SPOKE

Within the next couple of months **Phillips Dictation Systems** (☎ 01206-755880) are expected to launch a new version of their digital dictation/speech recognition system, which attracted so much interest on the **Technology for Business** (☎ 01932-781120) stand at last year's Barbican Exhibition.

In the meantime comes news that **Shakespeare SpeechWriter UK** (☎ 01342-316456) has launched a new Windows and Windows 95 compatible facility called OfficeSpeak Lite, which allows users to operate software applications by voice commands rather than a keyboard.

The software costs £399 and incorporates what Shakespeare call "automatic phrase capture technology", so users can 'cut and paste' phrases and terms of art from existing documents into the system's vocabulary manager, without having to retype them.

And **Responsive Systems**, developers of Dragon Dictate and Kurzweil based speech recognition systems, have produced a promotional video. For a copy call Jody de Falbe on ☎ 0171-602 4107. ☐

RETURN TO SENDER

Cardiff Magistrates Court has used Kalamazoo Security Print (☎ 0500 123345) to develop a new summons form incorporating a pre-paid return facility to encourage defendants to respond more promptly. Court authorities say the move will reduce the number of summonses to be chased up and so help cut costs.

PCS FOR PCS

Cambridge software house i2 Ltd (☎ 01223-844032) reports that its Analyst's Notebook software is now being used by every police force in the UK. The software is designed to produce analytic charts to help depict complex criminal associations and sequences of events.

CITIZENS MEET PSION

Printer manufacturer Citizen Europe (☎ 01753-584111) has launched a new connectivity kit to link its PN60 portable laser quality printer to the Psion Series 3a palmtop computer. A complete bundle, including Psion and printer, can be bought from PC World and branches of Dixons.

AND PSION GETS IN ON ACT!

Psion and software house Symantec (☎ 01628-592222) have announced a new version of the ACT! contact manager that will run on the Psion Series 3a. The package retails for £99 and will allow the synchronisation and exchange of ACT! files between a Psion and a desktop (PC/Mac) computer.

THE APPLE OF THEIR EYE

Over the past few years various hardy souls have tried to promote the cause of the Apple Macintosh, arguing that its intuitive operating system makes it the ideal computer for keyboard illiterate, techno-phobic lawyers. But, to little effect - and now the apparently unstoppable rise of Microsoft Windows has sidelined the Mac even further. So, is there anyone out there still developing legal software for the Macintosh, LTI reports...

Although the old Lawyers Macintosh User Group (LawMUG) has long since shrugged off its mortal coil, latest information suggests there are about 50 firms of solicitors in England, Wales and the Channel Isles still using the Macintosh platform in one way or another. Aviation insurance specialists Beaumont & Son in the City of London is probably the best known of these, plus a substantial number of students, barristers and sole practitioners - and even a few in-house legal departments, such as Eastern Electricity.

Given the relative fringe nature of the technology, there are a surprisingly large number of software houses and distributors serving this market (see *list below*) as well as a steady flow of new packages coming in from the USA, where the Mac has always enjoyed a large presence in law firms. (The impact in Australia has been even greater with Blake Dawson Waldron in Sydney running a 1000+ Mac installation, making it the largest Mac legal site in the world.)

One of the latest imports is the US-developed Amicus Attorney time and file management system distributed in the UK by Gavel & Gown (☎ 01242-243344) (☞ see *Issue No 4* for full review).

It also should not be forgotten that most of the major office automation applications - WordPerfect, Microsoft's Excel, PowerPoint and Word - are all available in file compatible Macintosh ➡

versions. Similarly products that began life on the Mac - such as Claris FileMaker Pro, which has been put to great use by firms like Serpell Son & Davey and Stephens & Scown - are now also available for Windows.

Communications has always been easy with the Macintosh particularly email and the Internet, while there are also Mac client versions available of MS-Mail, cc:Mail and Lotus Notes, as well as more specialist services like LINK (☎ 0171-396 9292). And of course if you opt for PowerMac hardware, you can run Mac, DOS and Windows applications on the same machine.

If there is a hero of the Mac legal market, it must be solicitor Nicholas McFarlane-Watts of Professional Productivity Solutions (☎ 01865-201801) whose company has been developing and selling legal software solutions for nearly 10 years. PPS's current product range includes debt collection, financial services, litigation support and conveyancing applications, as well financial and practice management products. (A demo disk is available showing the full range and how they can be used in an average practice.)

But, reflecting the realities of the market, most PPS products are now also available on Windows - which says it all.

☞ **Technical Note...** Other Macintosh legal applications and suppliers include: OnTime diary/scheduler from Prisma Office (☎ 01753-810899); TimeSlips time recording from Deepak Sareen (☎ 0181-423 8855); Power Secretary speech recognition system from Voiceworks (☎ 0181-455 4750); CAT contact and document management from Can Do (☎ 01452-527603); Oxford Law & Computing (☎ 01235-510396); Pulsar Business Programs (☎ 01453-751515); Eleetix Software (☎ 0171-251 5556); Accolade Systems (☎ 0181-365 0636); Brad Yates at Chromasonic (☎ 0181-203 8989); and Rothwell Systems (☎ 01252-377424) who carried out a lot of the integration work on the Beaumont project. □

DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT - YOU'VE GOT IT

International lawyers Hughes Hubbard & Reed has selected the Saros Corporation's Mezzanine system to manage its worldwide database of "mission critical legal documents". Within the next few weeks the completed implementation will be supporting 500,000 documents across 650 desktops in the firm's New York, Miami, Washington, Los Angeles and Paris offices.

The HH&R deal provided Saros (which describes itself as "the market share leader in enterprise document management" - ahead of both SoftSolutions and PC Docs Open) with the opportunity to make a number of new product announcements, including...

Saros LawLibrarian, a Microsoft Office compatible document management application specifically designed for the legal profession. It permits integrated redlining, the tracking of document creation and editing for transmission to time and billing packages, client-matter validation, site-definable file archiving and access to Lexis directly from a wordprocessor.

As Saros legal market development manager Randi Scheinblum puts it: "LawLibrarian allows the document to be filed in a personal or shared manner, with full security and version control and little or no effort on the part of the user. No DOS file names. No cryptic template names. No macros to remember. Just intuitive access to legal information and services, whether in-house or online."

Saros UK (☎ 01344-750321 & <http://www.saros.com>) has also published details of a Microsoft BackOffice compatible version of Mezzanine, which will run on a Windows NT platform and a new "cyber librarian" product called @mezzanine™ designed to organise, protect and maintain documents published on the Internet's World Wide Web.

On a technical note, Saros made use of Gilbert & Associates' VIEWz and ➡

➡ CommonSense technologies in the development of the new LawLibrarian system. For just over a year G&A has also been trading in its own right in the UK through its European affiliate **Gilbert Consulting** (☎ 0171-499 7111). In London users of its document management products include Slaughter & May, Freshfields and Farrer & Co.

☞ In other document management related developments: **DP Advisers** (☎ 0171-834 4068) has chosen the Sharp JX-330 scanner as their preferred scanner hardware to be used in conjunction with DPS-Legal document processing software. Also, the Keyfile Corporation has announced it has begun shipping document management and workflow applications for Microsoft's Windows NT server platform through its UK distributor **Datech** (☎ 0181-308 1800). □

HEARD ON THE WEB

The legal community's interest in the Internet continues to flourish, with Axxia Systems recently announcing that it is to build a World Wide Web site at <http://www.axxia.co.uk/axxia>.

In another Net-related move, as of 8th January all users of the **CompuServe** (☎ 0800-000200) network can have personalised email addresses to supplement the old-style numeric IDs. To register a new address existing CompuServe users should <GO REGISTER>.

The UK's largest Internet service provider Demon Internet is to supply Turnpike's suite of Windows Internet software utilities (including email/news reader, FTP client, Telnet, Traceroute, Ping and a registered copy of Netscape Navigator) for £25 + VAT. For details call **Turnpike** ☎ 01306-740601 or **Demon** ☎ 0181-371 1234 or visit their respective Web sites at <http://www.turnpike.com> and <http://www.demon.net/>.

And, **LEGAL TECHNOLOGY INSIDER** is now on the Web at <http://www.cloudnine.co.uk/cloudnine/insider.htm> □

CLARIS WORKS

The Claris Corporation (☎ 0181-756 0101) is now shipping **ClarisWorks 4.0 for Windows 95**. This is the latest upgrade to its integrated WP, spreadsheet and database software which started life on the Mac. The new version (which has an RRP of £129 + VAT) also contains an HTML translator for users wanting to create WWW documents.

ON THE MOVE

Litigation support specialist **Bowhawk Consulting** has moved to new offices at **Bowhawk House, 41a Waverley Lane, Farnham, Surrey GU9 8BH**. The telephone number (☎ 01252-716694) has not changed.

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Alexis Byter's COMPUTER LORE

It is now possible to buy a new 90MHz Pentium PC for under £1000 (excluding VAT) – the 75MHz model with 8Mb of RAM is even cheaper – and both of them are capable of supporting Windows 95 and the standard version of Microsoft Office for Windows 95.

Even if you lash out another £200-to-£300 for a 16Mb machine (which is arguably a more sensible option given that, for example, Microsoft recommend 12Mb of RAM for users wanting to run Access for Windows 95) this still represents an amazing bargain considering the retail price of Pentiums just 12 months ago. Or even compared with the price of 486 PCs some three years ago!

But, with all the signs pointing to further price reductions in the months to come – particularly when the new P6 Pentium Pro chips start becoming more widely available – such developments inevitably raise the question of: when is the best time to buy a computer?

Afterall, if hardware prices have fallen by between a quarter and a third over the last year, if you are prepared wait a further six months then that £1000 Pentium will be selling for nearer £850. A saving that is certainly not to be sniffed at if you are considering installing a network of twenty or thirty of the beasts! ➔

➔ Certainly there is an element of seasonality in PC pricing. You will often encounter attractive price-promotions being run during the slow months of the summer/long vacation period. And, look out for bargains in the spring – the traditional time for new models to appear – as dealers cut prices in an attempt to clear their inventories of old stock.

New models? Yes, for unfortunately, this is where you encounter what I modestly call *Byter's First Law of Computing*. Namely: It doesn't matter when you buy a computer, as it will always turn out to be immediately before a supplier launches a new model with twice the power and at half the price.

Or, to put it another way: there is never a "best time" to buy a computer, as there will always be a better bargain to be had another day.

My own view is that while you clearly should shop-around for the best bargain, the timing of the purchase should primarily be determined by need – if you need a computer, buy it today. ☐

IN THE NEXT EDITION

- "Better get technology or die" – Ian Walker of Russell Jones & Walker talks about case management.
- Unix on the laptop? A US firm explains why it can make sense.
- Voice mail – now affordable technology?

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