The 1990 Computer Procurement

by Angus Annan, latterly Associate Director, Information Services

Going back to 1967 and the opening of the University it was rather late at that point when the University realised that it would need a central computer and a computer manager. Both of these were in rather short supply just then and it was always going to be difficult to find an experienced computer manager. As a consequence some rather hurried decisions were made and in particular the Elliott company offered an end of production line Elliott 403 computer to the University and Mr John Teale was appointed as computer manager.

The Elliott computer served the University well for the first few years but eventually it was found that the mean time between failures was shorter than the run time of many research programs particularly from the chemistry Department. Efforts were made to improve the performance of the Elliott computer by collecting redundant equipment from other universities which were giving these machines up and expanding the capability of the Stirling computer. All credit to John Teale for doing his best in difficult circumstances but in the end the University concluded the best way forward would be to appoint a much more experienced director and seek to replace the Elliott with a modern advanced computer.

In about 1978 Tony Hewitt was appointed as director of the then computer unit coming from a post as assistant director at University of Reading. He had an immediate impact by organising a high-speed link to advanced computers at Manchester which give an interim solution to the difficulties of providing good computer power at Stirling. Subsequently he directed a new procurement which resulted in the installation of the Dec VAX range of computers as a large time shared system. This performed very well for nearly ten years to 1989 when it was thought best to have another procurement round and seek a replacement system. The strategy followed by Tony and those working closely with him was to seek a replacement which was essentially more of the same again as a central time shared system with terminal rooms for students and staff. However the funding for replacement computers was managed by a government body known as the Computer Board chaired by Tommy Flowers. He had been one of the outstanding figures of Bletchley Park during the Second World War and the Principal Prof Forty was also a member of this committee. To the embarrassment of all concerned the computer board rejected these procurement proposals for a second time shared system and pointed out that Stirling as one of the best campuses in the UK should really be thinking more adventurously and should go for a distributed system with PCs on every desk and drop the whole idea of installing a time shared system with terminal rooms.

As a consequence of this upset Tony Hewitt took early retirement and in an unrelated development Gordon Peacock University librarian also retired. John Forty decided it was time for a transformational change which would see the IT and library services come together to form Information Services and Bruce Ryan was appointed as the new overall director. The new distributed system was to go ahead and a set of new procurement proposals were prepared and this procurement was won by Hewlett Packard.

There were long delays because of difficulties networking these machines. These problems arose partly because of a network protocol known as coloured books and sponsored by the Joint Network Team which was an offshoot of the Computer Board. Another factor in the situation was that the Hewlett Packard bid had been very tightly priced to win the procurement competition. As a result, by the time that the coloured book protocol had been abandoned and the then relatively new IP protocol adopted and upgrades to the software had been applied by Microsoft, the tightly priced and tightly specified computers simply could not work well in the new situation. It fell to me, as Associate Director to lead the negotiations with Hewlett-Packard seeking a remedy. The contracted procurement cost £500,000 the top of spend of £300,000 but a negotiated solution was found which obliged Hewlett-Packard to spend a further £170,000 to fix all problems.

For those of us involved this was a period of huge stress and overwork but in the end when all was remedied we had one of the most advanced distributed systems of any university in the UK, leading-edge technology and a system which supported the development of teaching and research throughout the University. This laid the basis of the advanced facilities which everybody takes for granted now in any modern university, but Stirling was right in this revolution from the start.

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