

Making Computers Productive

by M H Kabir

In many organisations, people are quick to identify the need of using a computer. This identification arises out of two opposite perceptions. One identifying the computers as superhuman tool capable of performing impossible tasks in combination with human intelligence and robotic exactness. This view is likely to make the job of an IT professional very hard. The other view, however, is rational. It identifies computer as a management tool coming in to assist human in performing difficult and time-consuming task with speed, discipline and perfection.

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A Glorified Typewriter

In most of our offices, electric typewriters were never introduced. We have not really been able to relish eye-catching printout by a daisy wheel or the quality of output comparable to printed pages. Computers were able to feed that appetite. It is not uncommon to find the only use of a computer as a wordprocessor in many offices. But a computer is not a typewriter. Though word-processing has much in common with manual typing, they differ vastly.

Word-processing, no doubt, is greatly beneficial and is a significant step toward office automation. They offer many advantages and one should be aware of those to get maximum output from the computers. Merely correcting as many times as you could turn out to be a disadvantage, if it means changing a word or two, and consequently take a number of drafts before getting the final one as they increase costs and waste time.

There is no doubt that word-processing enhances productivity. There is however, a catch. It enhances productivity only with proper training. It is essential to learn about many fea-

tures of the software. Without proper training, one would not be able to get full benefit of such software.

In addition to that, one must reckon that the versatility of the computer would not be proved without using them for other matters like financial management or information-intensive databases. Better management of information can enhance the productivity and image of the organisation while increasing the capacity to serve the clients better. How many of our offices are contemplating to use the computers for such purposes?

A Game Machine

Management gurus concerned with behaviour in organisations pay due attention to job related stresses and suggest many ways for relieving them. If one feels a spasm, or a fatigue is overwhelming him, one may want briefly to retire or escape. And that is likely to rejuvenate him. Perhaps none

whether they need it or not, feel tempted to make room for a computer on his desk. The desktop adorns his office with its neat and designer look. May be from these persons, one would seek the evolution of an environment that allows automation and networking so as to lead and pioneer new forms for management. In reality, officials who are at positions up in the hierarchy may find it hard to spare time for working with a computer. Our management practices are different and a single individual may not change it much. Therefore, it remains confined to limited users rather than an e-mail to a close relation residing abroad.

An air-conditioned environment does not allow the dust to gather over a computer, however, its electronic brains are rarely stimulated, its electromagnetic pulses never spring to life. If one wonders, one may check when a file was last created or revised by invoking a DOS command or looking

through the file manager in the WINDOWS environment.

Acting on the Need

In many organisations, people are quick to identify the need of using a computer. This identification arises out of two opposite perceptions. One identifying the computers as superhuman tool capable of performing impossible tasks in combination with human intelligence and robotic exactness. This view is likely to make the job of an IT professional very hard. The other view, however, is rational. It identifies computer as a management tool coming in to assist human in performing difficult and time-consuming task with speed, discipline and perfection.

There are many repetitive and structured tasks in modern organisations ranging from personnel records to financial statements. These organisations usually have to serve a very big group of clients to their

satisfaction. We may imagine a public office which keep registers of companies and perform some regulatory functions by monitoring their activities time to time. Each company needs initially to register with it and this registration is essential for starting any venture.

While coming for registration, they would have to select a unique name and avoid duplication. Therefore, the job of getting these organisations into a regulatory fold is information-intensive from the very beginning. Timelines in processing application is essential as delay in doing so would frustrate a potential entrepreneurs initiatives.

Of course, such organisation in reality exist but for the sake of elucidation we might attribute some characteristics/functions to it, that may not really belong to it and as such the organisation we are discussing becomes imaginary. What is happening to the employee entrusted in such organ-

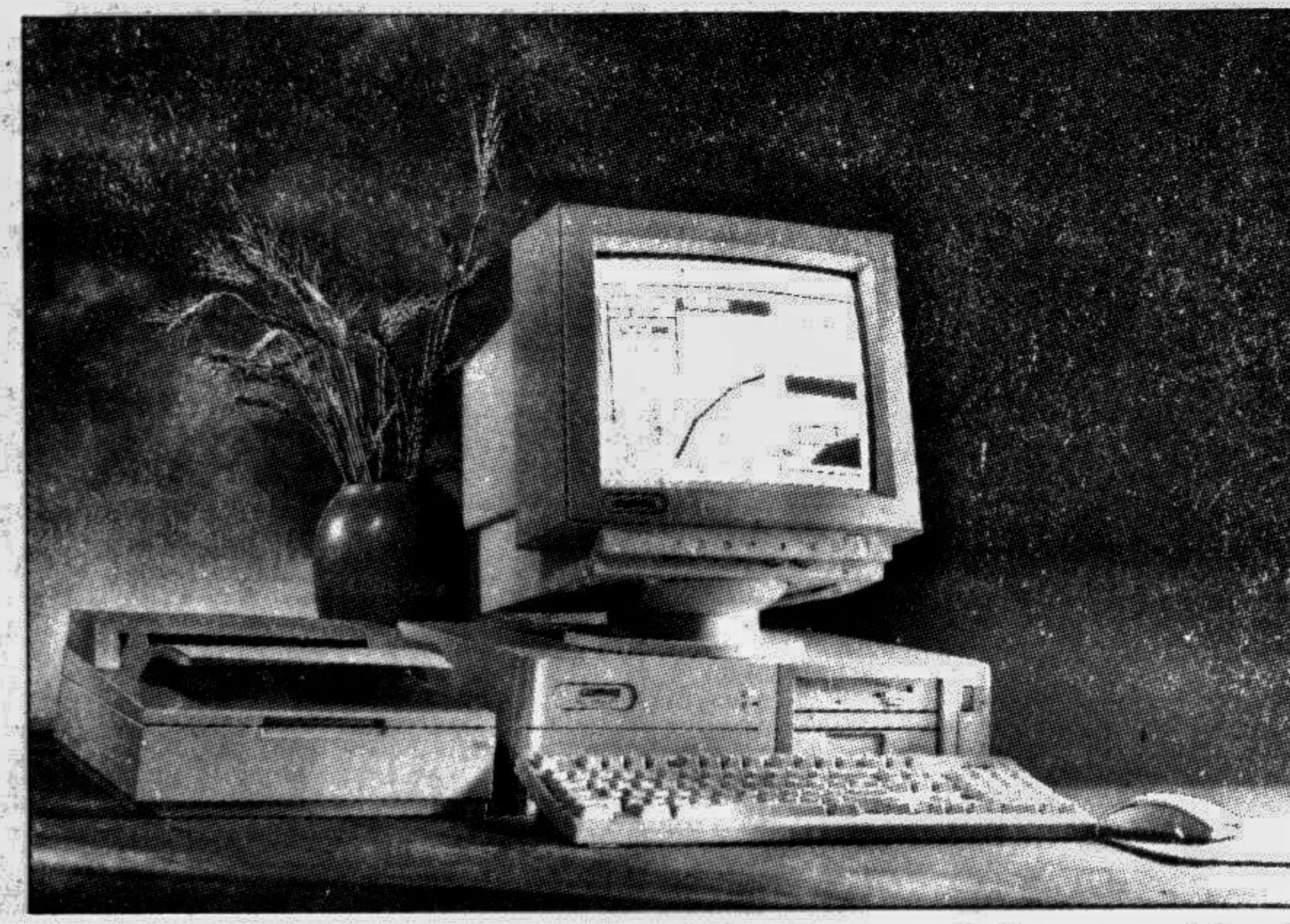
isations with checking the names for eliminating duplication. If there are 10,000 or 20,000 or 50,000 companies, his responsibility would include searching through many registers daily. And if alphabetical lists are not updated regularly and important letter keeps piling up for entry, the job would become unmanageable in a short span of time. We have to remember that the number of companies keeps on burgeoning.

Technology: Where Does it Stand

Passing judgement on management practices of such organisation could be devoid of fairness and might lack objectivity. Even in a manual or pre-IT stage, management information system could be quite efficient. People have employed so many good techniques. For example, an alphabetical listing in a lexicon gives quick access to words you are searching. In other words, a manual system could be quite effective barring the occasional clumsiness. In a library, one can access a book through author or subject index. A card register has been quite helpful in tracking personnel records. The records of thousands of files could be maintained in multi-layered index under different key words. How slow the system is depends upon the time and labour input

given. A bigger organisation may tend to require a large number of hands. It is a pity we have not shown much adeptness in running manual systems. This has possibly made systems difficult. An organisation like this can still see much improvement and defy the theory of evolution by leaf-frogging into technological era. With proper training and vision for IT, the hurdles could be overcome.

For example, the said organisation would be able to know within a few minutes, whether an application is submitted in a duplicate name or not. A database of its clients (those registered earlier) would give analytical tools in addition to ability to search in multi-layered format. It could be used by a planner to see the concentration of business on an area basis like urban/rural, or district/division, type of enterprises (public/private), or entrepreneurs (local/joint venture/wholly foreign) or category (small-medium-big) on the basis of capital employed. If the registered companies are required to submit any report on a specific timeframe that could be checked periodically and the defaulters may be asked to do so immediately. Finally with little more imagination, the database could be partially opened to the public or other clientele through on-line or off-line.



acquired through grants or loans under foreign-aided projects.

However, it may give the impression that proper preparations did not precede their introduction or acquisition. Computers, introduced in an office, need to be seen as management tools and as such sole purpose of their acquisition should be to achieve efficiency and effectiveness, to improve the performance of the organisation. If an organisation cannot relate them to its strategic plans and objectives, they may remain as a bad investment and consequently bring no gain, if not harm. But how are we using these machines?

It is not uncommon to see them in weird settings. There are instances of their underutilisation, misutilisation, and in some cases, no utilisation at

all. At least in many cases the computers are being used as a costly replacement of cheaper typewriters, as a video game or as a showpiece.

It is often alleged that the tendency to slack off during rush hours is common among our staff (leave office to chat with a friend, do some *taidris* at other's offices). These cast a scar on our efficiency, productivity, etc. Therefore, to stay at office to enjoy an adventure with the 'prince' or get 'paranoid' may not be objectionable. It is for the management to see how they are affecting the productivity and whether any alternative and productive use has been sacrificed.

Professional users need to learn about the power of the heavy duty software of today. This makes a case for systematic training in most of our offices, personnel performing these tasks such as typists/data entry operators are poorly trained. They have been put to their job after orientation courses designed to meet the commercial purposes only. There is another point to consider: the lacuna in English. So it becomes difficult for them to interact with

those that are available in these days' heavy weight software. Do not be surprised to see someone performing the results of an interview/examination in tabular forms and then spending hours to prepare the grading manually and changing rows after rows. Who is going to teach them to apply the power of the machine?

A Showpiece

The presence of a computer enhances the image of the executive. Therefore, many people,

All Eyes on the Guns with Political Power

A SKED who holds power in Hong Kong, residents will tell you: "The Jockey Club, the Bank and the Governor" — in that order.

It is one of the those quips that contains more than a grain of truth, a reflection of the fact that influence is power.

Tung Chee-hwa, Hong Kong's Chief Executive designate, might himself be pondering the question, for when he takes up the reins of office on 1 July a new player will have appeared on the Hong Kong scene — the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

"Political power," said the late Chinese leader Mao Zedong, "grows out of the barrel of a gun." It remains unclear how many barrels the PLA will station in Hong Kong, but best estimates range between 8,000 and 10,000, the latter being the strength of the British garrison before troop reductions began two years ago.

Beijing's attitude remains one of deep suspicion. It feels that Britain has not only moved the goalposts in the negotiations over Hong Kong, but also altered the playing field.

When the Sino-British agreement was signed in 1984, China expected Hong Kong to remain as it was.

In regaining sovereignty over the British colony, it thought the centre of power would merely move from London to Beijing. It did not appreciate that, even then, Hong Kong was less controlled from London than was apparent. What it cannot stomach now is the feeling that Britain has "de-colonised" Hong Kong since 1984 — solely because it is being handed over to China.

During protracted negotiations over the future of Hong Kong, it was mooted that Beijing did not need to station troops in the territory. But the PLA made clear its determination to maintain a real rather

Hong Kong Governor Chris Patten's warning of "enormous and irrevocable damage" if China restricts civil liberties is the latest in a series of increasingly strident comments. However, a Gemini News Service correspondent reports that many people are more concerned about a less publicly-contested issue — the role of the Chinese army in the territory. Robert A Steele writes from Doune, Scotland

Hong Kong handover



career officer, Liu has taken

pains to reassure local people.

The garrison will comprise specially-trained soldiers, who

will receive lessons in the life

and laws of Hong Kong as well

as in "negative political influences and the dangers of fast women."

The New China News Agency, which has acted as China's representation in Hong Kong, has stated that PLA troops stationed there will not interfere with the local police and other disciplined services.

But the special law for China's garrison in Hong Kong indicates that serving military personnel will be subject to Hong Kong laws only if they commit offences while off duty. And although there is regular liaison between the British and Chinese commanders, agreement has not been reached on the size, role and armaments of the PLA advance party.

Meanwhile, alleged PLA involvement in smuggling, piracy and shady deals over its extensive business interests on the mainland does little to assist Liu in selling his army to Hong Kong. The spectre of the PLA as a law unto itself is not over-fanciful.

In the final analysis, the Chinese Communist Party is propped up by the PLA, which is why such posts as chairman of the Central Military Commission are so powerful in the ruling gerontocracy. He who has the PLA on his side has almost limitless power.

Liu will have his patrons in Beijing. He will owe them loyalty and there will be much jockeying for position. It does not do to have backed the wrong horse.

Tung Chee-hwa will also have his patrons. Who really calls the shots in Hong Kong will depend on who has the strongest connections in Beijing.

The Daily Star Entertainment Guide

Wednesday 23rd April
(All programmes are in local time. There may be changes in the programmes)

BTV

3:00 Opening Announcement Al-Quran Programme Summary 3:10 News in Bangla 3:15 Patriotic songs 3:20 Recitation from the Geeta 3:25 Drama Serial: 4:30 Cartoon film: Top Cat 5:00 News in Bangla 5:40 Geetabitan: Tagore Song 6:10 Maner Katha 6:50 Open University 7:00 The News 8:00 News in Bangla 8:45 Package Drama 10:00 News in English 10:25 Muktadaria 11:30 News in Bangla 11:20 Thursday's programme 11:40 Close down

BBC

6:00am BBC World News

6:30 Time Out: Film 97

7:00 BBC World News inc.

World Business Report/Asia

Today/24 Hours 10:00 BBC World News 10:30 World Focus: Britain in View 11:00 The World Today 12:00 BBC Newsdesk 12:30 Hard Talk 1:00 BBC World News 1:30 World Focus: Britain in View 2:00 BBC World News 2:30 Time Out: Tomorrow's World 3:00 BBC World News 3:30 Hard Talk 4:00 BBC World News 4:30 Time Out: Film 97 5:00 BBC Newsdesk 6:00pm BBC Newsdesk 6:30 BBC World News 6:30 Time Out: Tomorrow's World 7:00 BBC World News 7:15 World Business Report 7:30 BBC Newsdesk 8:30 Time Out: Asia & Pacific 8:30 Time Out: The Clothes Show 9:00 BBC World News 9:30 Hard Talk 10:00 BBC World News 10:30 Time Out: Holiday 11:00 The World Today 12:00 Hard Talk 1:00 BBC World News 1:30 World Focus: The Money Programme 2:00 BBC World News 2:30 Time Out:

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