Editorial

The boss said: "Choose a personal computer for me, please." Don't read on yet – meditate for a moment, and have sympathy for a chap with such a frightful dilemma.

Two years ago such a problem was easily solved. At that time, you had small machines, which were called home computers, but which virtually were only suitable for playing games. Small business systems were more powerful, but too expensive to buy under the circumstances. The best you could do in that happy past was: give your boss a terminal to the existing mainframe, no training, and you could get it back after a month of non-use, smiling widely: "I told you—you were too early."

Now we are faced with a bewildering jungle of choice at prices many of our organisations can afford to pay. IBM took a dominant share of the personal computer market in no time. A huge bandwagon of manufacturers providing software and additional hardware for the IBM PC is moving very fast. Competitors (e.g. the HP-150, DEC Rainbow, Apple LISA then Macintosh, not to mention AT&T) are fervently trying to get their shares of the market (back). Prices are plummeting with never-expected speeds, and your buying situation changes every day.

Nevertheless, you have to make a decision, since the bloody toys are now really useful in a business environment.

Some advice for those with a dilemma:

1) Identify your users' needs: a scientist needing a recorder and processor for data from measurements requires something other than an accountant. In that respect, many brands have their own specific virtues.

2) Take care that your PC fits into your present and future network. That means that your machine can communicate *fully* with what you have got already. The guarantee from your potential supplier that the thing has an RS-232 interface (or whatever) is not enough: have them demonstrate that they can transmit every character in the file to the same position in the file on the other device.

3) Stick to a large manufacturer. Their commitment to this market has to be so high that they have to survive. Other, smaller brands will disappear in this jungle of competition, unless they are very clever. If you buy one of those, make sure that it will suit you for the whole of your depreciation period; otherwise you will be sitting behind an obsolete keyboard.

4) Be aware of the cost of additional hardware and PC software. For some brands they can drive up the cost of your PC to much more than you intended to spend.

Let's talk then about interfacing.... No—you'd better go back to your dilemma, and solve it now.

Cor van de Weteringh

"May I offer you the wine terminal?"

cartoon by frans van der wiel