Notes from the SCI Information Technology working group which met in Antwerpen on 5 August 1989

Present: Bruno Hanses, Klaas Sikkel, Paul Ticher (notes)

The group agreed firstly to recommend the following points:

1) For the foreseeable future the SCI standard should be set by the paper system we have now - with necessary modifications from time to time - as this is flexible and familiar. Any use of new technology should be based on the paper system as a reference, and should be compatible with the paper system.

2) SCI should always lay down the minimum possible conditions for branches (including groups and cooperating organisations) to participate in the exchange. New technology should not be forced on people unless it can be shown to be absolutely necessary.

3) New possibilities should be investigated or introduced gradually according to the following procedure:
   a) ideas, suggestions and information should be circulated
   b) experiments can be carried out by individual branches or bilaterally
   c) harmonisation with other branches should then take place where possible

4) Whatever we do must be slow and evolve from experience. For the time being we should concern ourselves only with the exchange of information, not with "doing placements" by computer. Placement by computer was rejected because it seems to be:
   a) much too costly and complicated for any possible benefit
   b) not possible to be as quick as, for example, a travel agent without complete centralisation, and this would be a bad thing because:
      i) it would have severe effects on placement policy
      ii) it would lack the flexibility which is inevitable and desirable within SCI
      iii) automation is much more difficult than you think (even after you've made allowance for it being much more difficult than you think) and SCI shouldn't allow itself to risk getting into trouble
      iv) maintenance of the system would be an enormous problem

(See detailed recommendations on an alternative policy attached)

5) We should produce a paper explaining:
   a) what is happening now (e.g. in Bonn and Belfast)
   b) what might happen, covering e-mail, word processing, fax, telex

A draft of part (b) of such a paper is attached.

6) We must accept that people are chaotic, especially SCI people, so we must make sure any technology we introduce does not reduce our flexibility.

PST 3/11/89

Proposed policy on the involvement of computers in SCI placement

The group which met in Antwerpen on 5 August 1989 to consider the use of new technology in SCI recommends that for the time being we do not consider using computers to carry out placements, and that instead the following be adopted as policy:

1) The official standard for exchanging volunteer information and carrying out placement remains the current paper system. It is robust, and has scope for flexibe measures to deal with problems as they arise.

2) No electronic standard should be set. If a workable system emerges and gains trust, only then should it be discussed as a new standard.

3) Whenever unilateral (e.g. Minitel) or bilateral (e.g. Norway/USA West) experiments are carried out, they must be capable of producing back-up paper copies.

4) Branches with electronic aids to volunteer placement must have a sound manual back-up system available and tested, including training for users/operators.

5) Existing electronic systems should be evaluated and the results circulated.

6) It should be recognised that a program suitable for one branch may well not suit another branch.

7) Whenever information is transferred electronically, it must have the facility for free-text comment as well as standardised information.

8) Computer systems should not be allowed to become a bottleneck in the placement procedure.

9) SCI should consider carefully the implications for privacy before moving to introduce a computer-based placements system.

10) Existing examples of quotas and practical agreements to protect smaller branches, could be extended if the use of computers put any branch at a disadvantage.

11) SCI should welcome, of course, the assistance of computers, for example in preparing statistics, providing an overview of activities, and speeding up routine work.

Fax (or Telefax)

Fax involves a small machine connected to the telephone lines, which sends an image of a piece of paper to a similar receiving machine. The image can be anything - text, drawings, maps, hand-writing, etc. It is converted by the fax machine into a pattern of dots, which is printed out by the machine at the other end, and looks a bit like a fuzzy photocopy. It is very easy to use without any technical skill.

Cost: The machines are fairly expensive (SFr1500?), but coming down in price. To use one effectively you really need an extra phone line just for the machine (though it is possible to manage without). The person sending the information pays normal telephone charges while the two machines are linked: the time taken depends on the amount of information on the page, but is around half a minute for an A4 sheet. (Try talking at 1000 words a minute!) The person receiving the information has to pay for the special paper which is used (SFr0.50 per A4 sheet?).

Short-term suggestions: SCI branches, groups and partner organisations with access to a fax machine should bring the number to the TEM.

Branches wanting to experiment with fax should probably not a buy a machine just yet: the alternatives are leasing, sharing someone else's, or using a commercial or PTT-run bureau.

Klaas Sikkel will find out more technical information to update this paper.

Long-term recommendations: Fax holds out excellent prospects for bi-lateral communication, and larger SCI branches at least should expect to have one within five years at most. It may make people lazy (like a photocopier does), and it may in the end need changes to our paper forms (e.g. less explanatory text on the part of the form to be sent), but we should wait and see.

Fax could be used for many of the non-formal bi-lateral messages which are now done by phone, and some other urgent papers (e.g. Friday lists near the end of the season, delayed info sheets) where speed is a factor.

Telex

Telex is an old-fashioned system for sending text electronically, which is now on its way out, being taken over by fax. It uses a special machine connected to a special network (not telephone lines). It is in widespread use by SCI's east European partners, by embassies, and by organisations in other continents. In general telex machines cannot store information: you have to type it in at the time you are sending it. You get a copy of what was sent, and firmer confirmation than with fax that the message was received.

Cost: We have not investigated this.

Short-term suggestions: Telex is a dying technology, not worth investing in. Branches needing to send and receive telex messages should use public bureaux. Paul Ticher will find out more about the possibility of using a computer to simulate a telex terminal, which apparently is possible.

Electronic mail (E-mail)

Most long-distance electronic mail services work through a central computer where each subscriber has a "mail box". The sender links their computer to the central one through the telephone lines and a "modem" and sends the message. Next time the receiver links their computer into the central one, they can obtain the message. You can choose when to make the connection, so you can use an existing telephone line if you only connect to the central computer occasionally.

E-mail can only send text which has been typed into a computer (or extracted from another program), but it can send the same text automatically to any number of different people at the same time. You need some computing skills to operate it, and it also depends on you checking your mail box for messages - it can be a very fast method of communication, but there is no way of making sure that a message has actually been collected.

The e-mail services can also be used for "bulletin boards", where different users contribute small pieces of information which are then available to everyone else when they choose to see them. A bulletin board or "conference" can be restricted to a particular group, and could be used, for example, to replace certain kinds of committee meeting, where the issues are mainly practical.

Cost: You need to have a computer (SFr1500 or more), a "modem" (SFr500 or so), a monthly subscription to the service (SFr30 per month?), and the necessary software (usually provided by the e-mail service). The person sending the information has to pay telephone charges (often just a national or even local call), but you need to call in and pay the phone charges when you collect your messages, too.

Short-term suggestions: SCI should welcome experiments by any branch wanting to find out more.

Long-term recommendations: SCI should not get involved in e-mail except through an established reliable service, and at some point should decide which one to use. (Users of different services cannot communicate with each other.)

SCI should also take care, because e-mail only works well among people with a common interest in doing it regularly. (Unless you check for messages daily it's not worth it.) There might also be discrimination against small branches and problems for new groups if e-mail became a significant part of SCI's operations.

Word processing

Many branches already use word processing, and there is some scope for increasing the value SCI gets from it. The 1988 ECM made recommendations, which the meeting endorsed:

Short-term recommendations: Branches which can do so should try to exchange listings (but not information sheets) on disc (12 copies in English, on 5.25" IBM-compatible, 360K discs, using WordPerfect 4.2 or ASCII), but they must also bring the information on paper.

Other SCI documents assembled from parts written by different people (e.g. seminar reports) could also be sent on disc.

Paul Ticher 6/11/89