

STAYING ON TOP OF COMMUNICATIONS

A PABX is vital for the smooth management of business communications.

'REACH out and touch someone.' So says a television advertisement by American Telephone & Telegraph (AT&T) in the United States. Yes, instant communication at your fingertips. That's what it is. Communication between two people at different places anywhere in the world is a reality. For the business world, the AT&T advertisement might just read: 'Reach out and close a deal.'

Telecommunications technology has come a long way since Alexander Graham Bell's accidental discovery in 1876. The telephone is not only ubiquitous but has also become an indispensable tool of modern living in slightly more than a century. This need is especially evident in the business arena where the efficient management of information is critical to decision-making and success.

Communications experts say that the future competitiveness of any organisation, regardless of its nature, will depend on two things: access to a growing pool of information from increasing sources and the speed with which the information can be accessed and processed.

The advancements made in telecommunications technology have also transformed office automation and opened up numerous avenues for the development of office technology. Industry experts say the growth rate in office technology in Malaysia is one of the fastest in Asia. Telephones, computers, fax machines, and pagers all need telecommunications services, and this is giving the local industry further thrust. Not that it's ailing. The industry has been thriving, thanks to the favourable economy and keen competition in the local business community.

Along with the surging volume of information in the modern business office comes the need for quick and efficient management of communication. The latest hi-tech office equipment, namely computers, word processors and copiers as well as telecommunications gadgets like telephones, facsimile machines and digital PABXs play a vital role in facilitating management.

Are you currently experiencing an overloading of your communications system with too many busy lines, problems with the equipment and so on? How about lost messages and reports of complaints from customers who are frustrated and irritated for having to wait too long for a connection? These problems can have detrimental effects on your business. All is not gloom and doom, however. The digital PABX system has an answer.

Digital PABXs recognised as one of the latest state-of-art office telecommunication tools even in the most advanced offices in Europe, the US and other parts of the Western world are fast becoming a regular office feature in Kuala Lumpur. Without a digital PABX, organisations wanting to locate computer terminals at various locations in their buildings have to pay a substantial amount for the wiring required to connect the terminals to their computers.

Ericsson, a household name in office telecommunication equipment, recently brought in digital PABXs to furnish the Malaysian business community with flexibility in their telecommunication system by allowing communications to be carried out through the common two-wire telephone cables already present in many buildings.

A digital PABX will be at the heart of any integrated system, providing the vital communication links among the various groups of equipment in the office. It will also allow voice and data transmissions to be carried out simultaneously along the two-wire cables.

Ericsson's MD 110/40 is a recent addition to its already successful MD 110 digital PABX which has been installed in over 30 countries worldwide.

Targeted at the medium-sized company market, the MD 110/40 is capable of managing up to 450 extensions and 60 trunk lines. It is a digital system of modular design that can carry both the analog and digital extensions, and handles 3,000 to 4,000 calls per hour. The MD 110 is the fourth generation PABX, providing for multiple nodes, distributed control and Local Area Network (LAN) integration.

PABXs seem to be evolving along the same line as computers. They are getting smaller and smaller with the introduction of each new generation. Like computers, PABXs used to require special rooms to accommodate their bulk and cooling requirements. The new MD 110/40 now fits nicely into a box (occupying approximately 0.43 sq m) similar to the size of a filing cabinet and can be located in any convenient corner of the office.

Despite being housed in a smaller cabinet, the performance of MD 110/40 is no less inferior since it was designed on the same technology as that of all Ericsson digital exchanges located around the world including Malaysia. The MD 110/40 is especially designed for connectivity and can support equipment ranging from the common analog telephones found in almost every home to IBM's latest computers.

While LANs can be implemented rather quickly with the MD 110, the system also supports area-wide networks. The MD 110 can be equipped with gateways to both Ethernet and IBM Token Ring networks. For wide area networks, the modular structure of the MD 110 allows individual modules to communicate with each other through microwave, fibre optic or cable links.

Distributed control plays a crucial role in ensuring continued operation for a PABX-linked network. As controlled for the MD 110 series is decentralised, faults which occur can be localised, leaving other parts of the network unaffected. Digital telephones connected to the system are provided with triple line access and the features of many electronic key telephone systems.

The most important feature of MD 110/40 is that its size and functions can be easily upgraded. It is possible to connect different computerised support systems to the MD 110/40 such as an on-screen directory and diversion support for the operators, a call management system for call charging and cost information handling system to enable the user to handle moves and changes in the system. The Ericsson VOIS Voice Mail can also be used with the MD 110/40 to further improve the efficiency of telephone communications.

The MD 110/40 is also capable of operating in the Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN). This is important considering the widespread use of ISDN. It is basically a set of internationally agreed recommendations which allows people and businesses to communicate using virtually any kind of digital equipment through a commonly accessible network.

Ericsson is currently servicing clients like the Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Utara Malaysia, and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Sarawak Shell Berhad is one of its biggest corporate clients. Graham Teale, Shell's communications head, has this to say about the MD 110 system: 'Our experience has been that the MD 110 is a super switch. To a large extent it's self-healing – it's good at recovering from faults, and working around problems. As and when

we want to expand the MD 110 system, we will simply buy another Line Interface Module (LIM); put the cards in it, and away we go.'

The majority of offices in Kuala Lumpur have a PABX system. But many are unaware that an electronic key telephone, or simply the keyphone system is just as effective, and less bulky. GEC keyphones are capable of covering 60 extensions, and undertaking the task of a small PABX system. Its features include paging, message waiting, conferencing, hold/transfer facility, speed and chain dialing. In addition, an executive exclusive line can be programmed to provide privacy.

See Yew Hock, Ericsson's sales manager says Ericsson currently has 40 per cent of the overall telephone systems market which includes keyphones and PABXs. He hopes to reach 50 per cent target in the near future. See says Ericsson is very competitive in the 'above 200 extensions' market.