

N2 DATA PROCESSING

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WHY IBM KILLED FUTURE SYSTEM
MANAGEMENT AND COMPUTERS
PROFILE: NCR'S BOB POTTER



SPL'S
PERCY
HARPHAM

Exporting expertise

A Lower Hutt computer bureau has developed into a significant exporter of software.

BARRIE SAUNDERS reports

IN 1967 Percy Harpham decided to stay in New Zealand while other professional people were leaving in droves to escape the credit squeeze. He wanted to go on working here, doing what he knew best and possible selling the end product overseas.

He took the plunge, left his data processing job at Dulux, and rented 400 square feet from the Bank of New Zealand in Lower Hutt.

The gamble paid off. Today his company, Systems and Programs (NZ) Ltd (SPL), occupies 8000 square feet in the Public Trust Office and employs a staff of 44.

Harpham believes (SPL) is New Zealand's largest software concern. Total sales are around \$600,000, about 10 per cent of which is exported.

The company's best-known export is a school time-tabling system developed originally for New Zealand schools. It is now being bought by seven British education authorities though New Zealand's Education Department is not enthusiastic about it. The right to develop and market the system in the UK and Europe has been sold to the National Computing Centre in Britain for \$50,000.

United States transport companies have shown a strong interest in a bus scheduling system developed for a New Zealand local body.

SPL staff work in IBM, ICL, Burroughs, Honeywell and other machines, and Harpham believes this flexibility is a plus for his firm. They



Percy Harpham: decided to stay

will shortly gain experience with Sperry Univac, which is supplying Wanganui Law Enforcement Data System, for which (SPL) will be doing the bulk of the software.

SPL won't be doing it alone.

The contract will be handled by Publica in which SPL has a third share.

The other partners are an American firm PRC-Public Management Services and the English company Logica.

Late last year PRC took a 20 per

cent shareholding in SPL.

This shareholding change resulted in Robert Shumate of PRC joining the SPL board.

But the tie-up means much more than this. PRC has officers in 41 countries and, as Harpham puts it, "This gives SPL credibility around the globe. As part of the share sale we have arranged a marketing and technical interchange agreement with them which gives us the benefit of being multinational without the disadvantage of loss of New Zealand identity and control."

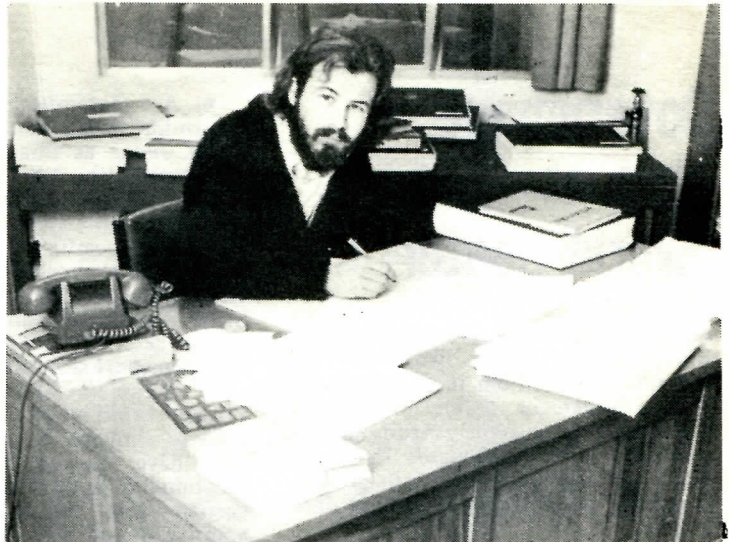
Harpham says PRC had been involved in about 70 per cent of all law enforcement systems in the United States. "They have schemes operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

SPL regards itself as a problem solving company and specialises in management systems. This covers accounting, business data processing, office management, management organisation, scheduling time-tabling and allocation problems, simulation, communication networks and on-line data processing.

Harpham has degrees in engineering and science (Mathematics) and has done courses in accountancy. Most of his staff are graduates with majors in accounting the sciences and engineering.

SPL clients have included the Auckland Regional Authority, Dulux New Zealand Ltd, ICI New Zealand Ltd, stockbroker R A Jarden and Co, Shell Oil New Zealand Ltd, and Philips

photos: John Selkirk



SPL staff: Mark Annabell (above), Ken Brann (below left) and Lyman Chapin

Electrical Industries of NZ Ltd. In Australia SPL has done business with Dulux and the stock broking firm of Guest and Bell.

"We try to keep the computer on a low key basis — our main orientation is problem solving," Harpham says. "We are particularly concerned with system quality and reliability. "Not many people are prepared to face the fact that the computer is fallible. We recognise that mistakes are possible and try in our system design to minimise the consequence."

SPL places the emphasis on software and doesn't believe it is in direct competition with the computer bureaus which handle a lot of data processing. It sees the mainframe manufacturers which can offer software packages as the major opposition.

But despite the emphasis on software SPL has just acquired its own Burroughs B2700. This doesn't mean everything will be done on the Burroughs. "We will use the Burroughs to develop programmes for IBM and other machines."

Harpham believes the software industry has gone through several stages and he is trying to take on from the craft level. In the international marketplace he claims New Zealand has several advantages. He cites the lower salary level as the first and claims this country is an ideal pilot plant in which to prove computer techniques because of the small size of its business environment.



Below: Chris Wallace and Dr Bob Sewell

