Lorry Load

According to transport consultant Terry Palmer, most of the truck fleets in this country consist of around five vehicles. But most of the computer packages available for managing them are designed for a larger number of lorries, and cost over £1,000. The MEM Computing fleet management package, for example, costs £1,200, plus another £850 each for vehicle costing and tachygraph analysis modules — the program can handle fleets of 1,000 vehicles or more.

It's not surprising that, with those sort of costs, few small fleet owners have felt able to justify computerising their operations, as Terry Palmer found when he conducted a survey sponsored by the Science and Engineering Research Council. As a result, Palmer set about devising a system that would make more commercial sense.

Although he started developing it using Lotus 1-2-3, he ended up fitting it into the memory of one of the most popular micros on the market — the Commodore 64. Palmer used Vizastar, a programmable spreadsheet-cum-database that costs less than £100. He estimates a total cost including software and hardware of £1,000 — about a fifth of the total cost of the larger systems.
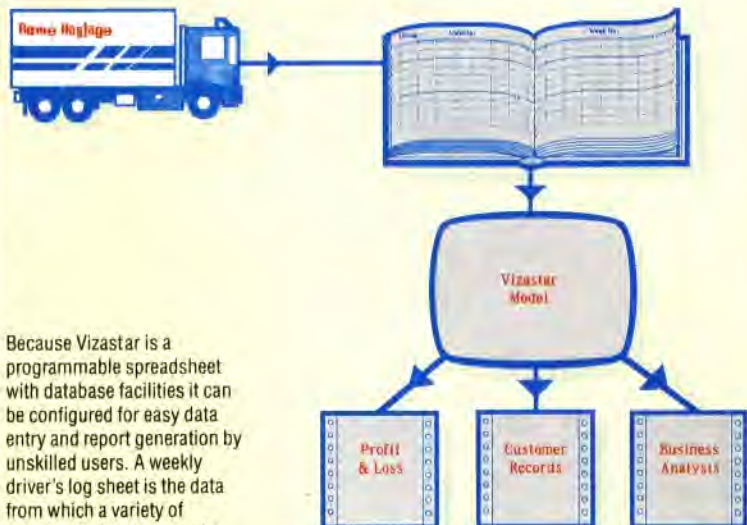
Palmer's research was conducted as part of a project he is carrying out in association with the Polytechnic of Central London to see if small truckers would find the information provided by such a system useful, and if they would be prepared to invest in it. He started with the familiar log sheet that all truckers use, and came up with report forms on which the truckers record all the jobs done, their journeys, destinations, mileage, fuel costs, cash expenses and operational costs. At the end of each week, the data from the sheets is transferred into the spreadsheet.

At the end of data entry, the sheet has already calculated whether a profit or loss has been sustained, and produces a complete analysis of the week's business. The weeks can be further consolidated in monthly analyses, and the months into an annual return.

Since Vizastar also treats a part of the sheet as a database, saving records and retrieving them from disk in exactly the same way as dedicated database programs (using a key field, or allowing browsing through the list by the use of Next, Prior or Current, First or Last commands), a permanent customer record can be maintained. The sheet can also be used for quotations.

On The Move

Because Vizastar is a programmable spreadsheet with database facilities it can be configured for easy data entry and report generation by unskilled users. A weekly driver's log sheet is the data from which a variety of reports and invoices can be produced

characters. This option has most of the common word processing facilities, including word-wrap, block move, insert and delete.

It is also possible to LOAD a spreadsheet into part of such a document. The spreadsheet would still be 'active' — meaning that its formulae, values or other contents may be modified for the purpose of the main document, without, of course, affecting the sheet on disk.

Though memory limitations prevent more than a couple of required options to be accessible within any one program, all four of these programs can access word processing or database files produced by other programs from the same publisher. For example, Vizastar can handle word processor files generated by Vizawrite; Micro Swift can access database files produced by Micro Magpie; and Practicalc and PS can use files from Practicorp's Practifile. Indeed, since they all utilise sequential formats, they can all access and manipulate files from each other, as well as completely unrelated programs, like the Easy Script word processor. If this isn't exactly complete software integration, it's taking us very close to it.

Micro Swift: For the Commodore 64
Price: £19.95
Publisher: Audiogenic, PO Box 88, Reading, Berks.
Format: Disk

Practicalc II: For the 48K Apple II, BBC Micro and Commodore 64
Price: £69.95
Publisher: Practicorp, Goddard Road, Whitehouse Ind Est, Ipswich, Suffolk IP1 5NP
Format: Disk

PS: For the Commodore 64
Price: £69.95
Publisher: Practicorp, Goddard Road, Whitehouse Ind Est, Ipswich, Suffolk IP1 5NP
Format: Disk

Vizastar: For the Commodore 64
Price: £99.95
Publisher: Viza Software, 9 Mansion Row, Brompton, Gillingham, Kent ME7 5SE
Format: Disk with 4Kbyte cartridge