ITALIAN ELEGANCE

In the highly competitive world of office machinery, the market is dominated by the American and Japanese giants. But one European-based multinational, Olivetti, has gained such a reputation as a manufacturer of 'elegant and serious' office machines that it is now considered a major force in business automation.

Design Angle
The Olivetti M20 business computer is a 16-bit machine that was first launched in 1981. It incorporates a Zilog Z8000 microprocessor and uses the Olivetti PCOS operating system. Olivetti has recently launched an IBM PC-compatible version of this machine

Smart Exterior
Olivetti has always been noted for the advanced design of its products. But its concern for smart appearances also applies to the architecture of company buildings. This office was erected in 1959 and shows many features that were subsequently adopted by other architects
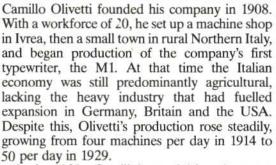
Camillo Olivetti founded his company in 1908. With a workforce of 20, he set up a machine shop in Ivrea, then a small town in rural Northern Italy, and began production of the company's first typewriter, the M1. At that time the Italian economy was still predominantly agricultural, lacking the heavy industry that had fuelled expansion in Germany, Britain and the USA. Despite this, Olivetti's production rose steadily, growing from four machines per day in 1914 to 50 per day in 1929.

In the 1930s, Camillo's son Adriano began to reorganise the company structure, introducing students from Olivetti's own night school, founded in 1924. Company housing and social benefits were also made available — a 'cradle to the grave' policy reminiscent of that later used to great effect by the Japanese. While industry in the rest of the world struggled through the pre-war economic depression, Olivetti continued to grow, and by 1933 the company had sold 15 million office products. In 1937 the first Olivetti teleprinter was launched, followed in 1940 by the company's first calculator.

The Second World War brought a temporary halt to Olivetti's expansion, but in the post-war years the company concentrated on developing new markets, arriving in the UK in 1948. The company's success was founded on elegant design and quality products, and even IBM executives were forced to admit that Olivetti products 'fitted together like a beautiful picture puzzle'.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Olivetti began to concentrate on the development of business computers. This process began with the introduction of a numeric accounting machine in 1955, and Olivetti's first mainframe computer — the Elea — was developed a few years later.

The company continued to diversify, moving away from mechanical office machinery towards the electronics-based equipment that Olivetti identified as the major trend in office automation. A new range of minicomputers was introduced, together with banking terminals and communications equipment.

Today, Olivetti manufactures a vast range of electronic business machines — over 1,000 different products are available in the UK alone — and the company invests large sums in developing software support for its machines. In 1982, Olivetti was the second largest computer manufacturer in Europe (surpassed only by IBM), with the M10 portable computer and the M20 business machine both selling well.

The M10 hand-held computer weighs about 1.7 kg (3.25 pounds) and comes equipped with an 8×40 character screen. The machine is battery-powered and has 8 Kbytes of internal RAM that can be expanded to 64 Kbytes. The M20 16-bit business machine runs on a Z8001 microprocessor, which has proved unpopular with other 16-bit machine manufacturers. It also contains an 8086 processor, allowing some compatibility with CP/M-86 and MS-DOS.

Olivetti is also planning a new IBM-PC compatible machine that the company claims will cost less than its IBM rival. Called the M24, it features an 8086-2 processor and has the option of a Z8001 card to make it compatible with the Olivetti M20. This compatibility has meant that Olivetti has been forced to abandon its own PCOS operating system.

Olivetti has recently signed a deal with AT&T (the world's largest telecommunications company) to collaborate on a project to develop the Unix operating system. And there is no doubt that in the future Olivetti's worldwide dealer network and productive research and development division will maintain the company's reputation for stylish and well-manufactured business products.