

Computer literacy

By Eddie Coulter

There was a time when it was thought that a job in computing might equally be found among computer users or in the computer industry itself, if however, as a result of the increasing use of computing in business, one expects future computer-job prospects to predominate among users, it might be wise to reflect on an interesting phenomena.

Recent years have seen a small systems boom with ever-more powerful personal and minicomputers and many being strung together in distributed networks. Many companies are developing sophisticated systems relying on using databases and using powerful operating systems such as Unix. The trend will continue.

But few such installations employ any dedicated computer staff. The computer expertise is provided by computer industry support staff. Many new computer users are becoming sufficiently computer-literate to run their installations on their own.

Garth Selvey, managing director of TIS Applications, which provides fourth generation languages and support for Unix systems, said: "The penetration of medium systems has only just started to scratch the surface."

"As users have become more aware of how to use systems running under Unix, so more people are specifying their own applications. We now have a situation in accounting for example, where a new breed of computer-literate accountants are dictating what they want from a system, although if you ask them to install it they wouldn't know how to."

Others will, for example, design their own stock-control system while management people are increasingly expected to use a spread-sheet and universities are turning out high-calibre people who may well have done business studies covering computing and are aware of Unix and several computing languages.

Such people are not computer people, but sufficiently computer-aware that they are starting to demand more from their small — and sometimes not so small — systems. They are looking

at distributed databases and are developing their applications without specialist computer skills.

Mr. Selvey added: "Larger distributed installations may employ a systems manager or computer liaison officer or some one as a non-computer manager to ensure that the systems are supplied according to specification and working correctly. Otherwise the management of systems is in the hands of non-computer people — applications oriented operators."

It means that the user area likely to experience the greatest growth in systems use will

achieve most of their expansion without resort to computer staff.

"More people will be needed by the computer industry itself," said Mr. Selvey. "Information technology will still need specialist skills to keep it afloat."

"It depends on software tools, standards, training and bespoke coding. There are as many as 20 categories of skilled computing staff required that I can think of covering specialist applications, systems skills, back-room people, systems specifiers, and training. Support staff and trainers are the two things that make it all possible."