

Business Computing: the Second 50 Years

A 2-day conference for business leaders



1951: Those magnificent men and their computing machines

Fifty years ago, Britain was emerging from the shadow of a long war and taking on a new lease of life. The Festival of Britain that year was the outward symbol of a new energy. There was a dome among the festival's special constructions on the South Bank then – a Dome of Discovery – only this one, along with the other festival attractions, was a huge popular success attracting more than ten million paying visitors over just five months.

1951 was also a general election year in the UK, the year in which Churchill, the great war leader who had been spurned by the electorate in the first post-war election in favour of the un-warlike Attlee, came back into power, though the Labour party took 4.5 per cent more of the popular vote – nearly 1.3 million more votes – than Churchill's Tories.

If it seems an age ago, it was. Consider that fifty years before the festival, Queen Victoria had just died and the horse-drawn carriage was still the prevailing mode of transport. So many inventions of the modern world were, in 1951, still in the future.

It had, however, taken the second world war to propel the 20th century's greatest invention, the most profound in its impact, to a point of lift-off. The impetus that gave rise to the electronic computer was the complex mathematical calculations that were needed for code-breaking, or to direct, at great speed, the increasingly sophisticated hardware that war produced.

It was only as an afterthought that people came round to thinking that these new mathematical and scientific wonders could perhaps be applied to more mundane tasks and that electronic data processing could be the answer to the growing mountain of paperwork that was threatening to engulf the business world.

The J. Lyons company - in many ways a throw-back to an earlier, more genteel age of tea and cakes in tasteful, unhurried surroundings - was to prove, against all odds, the trend-setter in this respect. Family-run and a business confined to the UK, albeit a household name here, Lyons, a company that would not have appeared on the radar screen of influential international businesses, not only saw the business opportunity, but went ahead and built its own computer, ran the world's first computerised business applications and went into the

commercial computing business, both as a manufacturer making and installing computers for other companies and as a bureau providing a computing service.

The remarkable story of LEO (Lyons Electronic Office) is without parallel in the history of computing and provides the platform both for a 50th anniversary review of business computing in the time since that first application in 1951 and a look ahead at what might be in store.

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