

NEW HORIZONS

Integrated Suite

Psion's Xchange is a suite of integrated business software packages based on the software created for the Sinclair QL. Xchange includes the Quill word processor; Archive database manager; Abacus financial planner and Easel business graphics system. The four packages may be purchased together or separately. Xchange is available for the IBM PC and PC XT, ACT Apricot and Apricot XI, and the Sirius I. Additional versions are planned for the Apple Macintosh and Digital Rainbow.

Psion is a company generally associated with Sinclair Research: it produced the Horizons program for the Spectrum, and developed the four applications programs that come with the QL. Recently, it has diversified into business software and ventured into the hardware market with its Organiser pocket computer.

Psion was founded in 1981 by Dr David Potter, a lecturer at Imperial College, London. The company's first marketing coup was a group of four packages for the newly-released ZX81: Flight Simulator, Backgammon, Vu-Calc and Vu-File, all of which were written by Charles Davies and Colly Myers. This small range of quality programs — a simulations package, a game, a spreadsheet and a database — immediately established the company's name. In 1982, when Sinclair Research came to commission a package to demonstrate the strength of the Spectrum, it was not surprising that Psion was the software house chosen to develop the cassette.

The popularity of Sinclair's machines has resulted in a large market for Psion's software. The company has had some notable successes: the combined sales of the ZX81 and Spectrum versions of Flight Simulator, for example, have exceeded 500,000 copies. Estimates for the total worldwide sales of Psion cassettes have passed the three million mark. And with its recent announcement of the 'Xchange' range of software, Psion showed its first signs of a desire to diversify — in this case by making a bid for part of the £2 million business software market.

Psion has always been an innovator. It led the way in developing the technique of 'cross-compiling' software for home computers, a process whereby a program is developed on one machine for use on another. The Horizons introductory package for the Spectrum was written on a Tandy TRS-80. Today, the company uses two VAX 750 minicomputers for all its software (see page 381). It was on these machines that the QL's suite of programs — Abacus (a spreadsheet), Archive (a database), Easel (a graphics program) and Quill (a word processor) — was written. Psion Support has organised QLAB, a helpline for QL users that guarantees a written reply to queries within 48 hours.

Plans are well advanced for a number of business programs for the IBM PC, Apricot, Sirius, DEC Rainbow and Macintosh computers. Like the QL suite, the Xchange range of programs



IAN MCKINNELL

features a spreadsheet, database, graphics program and word processor. What sets these apart from other business packages, Psion claims, is the ease with which data can be transferred between them.

Another development from Psion that has gained a lot of attention is the Organiser (see page 441). The appearance of a pocket computer from what had been regarded as a software company came as a surprise to many people. A company spokesman, Robin Kinnear, puts the development in perspective: 'The key is that Psion is a microcomputer software company. We thought of the Organiser as a very smart idea in terms of software packaging and looked around and found there was nothing comparable. So Psion decided to make its own hardware. The development was very much software-led.'

At the moment, only three applications packages (science, maths and finance) are available for the Organiser, along with the eight Kbyte and 16 Kbyte RAM packs (or 'datapaks' as they are called). Psion is considering adding other program packs, and it has also been approached by a variety of individuals who wish to write software for the machine.

Market expansion is another company priority at the moment: subsidiaries have recently been established in the United States and South Africa, and contracts for extensive distribution of Psion products throughout Europe have been signed. Furthermore, Sinclair Research has launched a big sales drive in Eastern Europe, beginning with the export of 400 ZX81s to Czechoslovakia. Psion, which has already taken some trouble to produce foreign language versions of its software, is sure to follow.



Leading Light

Dr David Potter is the founder and majority shareholder of Psion. Formerly an academic who specialised in Computational Physics at Imperial College, London, and the University of California, he founded Psion as Potter Scientific Investments