

## REAL fun TIMES

We were a team of six including two technical developers, four operator/programmers plus a team leader tasked with ensuring the Line Broadcasting System software was developed, tested, implemented and maintained and the system was live for the 5 day and 4 night shifts each week. Once fully operational we started developing a system enabling the 1800 to also control the painted body store.

Our Morris Motors Systems Department management could not get their heads around real-time computing. They insisted that two "operators" were present whenever the system was running. This meant two of us who were developing the new software had to work night shifts 4 nights per week. Not a lot of development was done on nights! This came to a head one night when the factory superintendent came in to our office, found no-one there, but spotted two figures in sleeping bags, heads on pillows and an alarm clock on the computer room floor.

"What do you think you are doing?"

"Oh, we didn't feel well so thought we should lie down."

Management were not happy. We explained that there were no computer "operations" required, and without access to program spec writers it was difficult to write programs at night. We suggested that there should be a stand-by/call out system. Management liked this.

"OK, from now on this is how you can operate."

"What are we going to be paid?"

"Nothing. It is now part of your job spec."

We joined the union ASTMS.

Formal negotiations commenced involving a union rep, me and a Systems Dept manager. Meantime we were allowed to operate our own shift system with only one person on a long (6pm to 8am) boring night shift.

Formal negotiations dragged on, eventually culminating in an "off-site conference" between myself, a senior union rep from outside the company, a senior Systems Manager and a Company HR Manager. The agreement was

- there would be a nominated person on standby covering all non office hours when the computer was switched on.
- standby would be paid at 15% of that person's hourly rate.
- call out would be paid at 150% (I think) of the hourly rate.
- call out would be for 3 hours or actual length, whichever is the greatest .
- travel time was included but travel expenses would be added.
- a pager would be provided to the person on standby.

Success! Only problem was there was no operational pager system back then! An in-house system could be provided but would need "an erection" on Christmas Common.

Christmas Common was an area of high ground on the Chiltern Hills where an aerial would be needed to provide pager signals. For the remainder of my time at Cowley we had to provide a home phone number for the person on standby.

This whole process was a fun, learning period for many of us and, I think, may have been ground breaking.

It had some interesting consequences, and also came back to bite someone.  
More of that another time.

Facebook Feedback

**Bob James**

Marvellous memories

**Brian Johnson**

happy days, my days on standby it was something like 15 percent of your hourly rate per hour on standby plus 4 hours pay each time you actually got called. but boy did young little me save the customer from some massive problems. interaction with nightshift foremen was a real learning experience. happy days.

**Mike Watson**

Brilliant recollection of detail Rogan! 🍷

**Dave Handley**

Rogan - thanks again for these memories . I'd forgotten all about shift allowance and overtime payments . Several people I knew took out huge mortgages and could not afford to come off shift .

Tales such as these will make fascinating reading for the AR online community . Keith Adams - please take a look at this one ?

**Bob James**

I only worked on standby for a short while, but the ops guys were always very supportive.

**Brian Johnson**

This post made me think about some of the incidents when I was carrying a radiopager for Istel...

1 I got called into a well know car site where the computers were, and the operator explained that the system disk had failed (they were removable disks). He showed me, the software support, a system disk that had deep physical scratches in it, there had been a full-on head crash. At first, he had not called the hardware engineer in, or me, his first reaction had been to take the spare system disk out of the cupboard and use it to replace

the one with deep scratches. That disk proceeded to get deep physical scratches too. So, being out of system disks he decided to call me in. He had still not called in the hardware engineer. I got there and told him that the drive was clearly broken, and it would just scratch any disk that was put in, and that the first thing to do was get the drive fixed, so we called in the hardware engineer. Nice hardware engineer chap came out, took the drive to bits, fixed it, put it back together, and assured me it was ok. The only other spare system disk was back at the Istel offices, so I headed off there in the middle of the night, and got that system disk. Took that spare system disk back to the car site put it in the repaired drive, and fortunately all booted correctly, and systems all worked ok. I don't think there was another spare system disk, it would probably have been a full reinstall the operating system job had that not worked. A long night, and I trained the operator up about the reasons it was a bad idea to put a spare disk into a drive which was physically scratching disks.

2 Another night I got called in and the labels which told one factory which engines and axles to build were not being printed. The engines/axles were produced supposedly "just in time" and there were many combinations of engine size, gearbox, emissions kit for different markets, and so on, and different kinds of axles too. So, without those labels one whole car factory was stopped, it didn't know what to produce, and just producing generic engines/axles was a definite "no no". Lack of engines/axles would shortly stop production at the main assembly plant down the road too, not good. Fair enough they had called me in, it could have been the print queues in software. They had also called the hardware engineer it too, in case it was hardware problem with ports etc. It didn't take me long to work out that the real problem was the comms line between the site where the computer was, and the factory where the printer was, the comms line was down, and BT the comms vendor were not on "out of hours" support, there was no way to get them involved until normal "day time" hours. So, there I was with the most senior people on-site at night glaring at me, all on peace money & their bonuses significantly impacted by production stopping, furious at their own management for not having a better support agreement with BT, and expecting miracles. Thinking very much outside the box, and making the solution up as I went along, I copied the files of the labels which needed printing to tape, took the tape back to the Istel office, and printed off a whole nights worth of cards myself, then carried them down to the car, and drove them off to the engine/axle plant. So, they could restart working from the cards I had produced as a big "work around" that night. Another long night, got them through a big issue which was not really a software problem. BT were called in at 9.00 am, and comms line was quickly fixed, so normal service was resumed.

3 Not really a traditional call out problem, as they waited until 8.30 in the morning when we were in the office to call. They would not tell us what was wrong, just a very worried hushed "you had better get here quick". Myself, and my friend, got there and we were

asked to look around and guess what was wrong... They had produced hundreds of cars with red seat belts, and all we could see was masses of cars with red seat belts everywhere. Opps. One of their innovations had been to offer the car buyer the option of red seat belts, and we had been working on software changes to allow that for a while. We didn't really have a test system, the only real test was going live. We got back to the office and checked the code, and the loop which selected red seat belts for a particular car was not reset at the top of the loop, so as soon as any car had a red belt all subsequent cars would get red belts too. We quickly put a reset in the code, recompiled it all, and delivered it back to site and got it live. Phew, I cannot remember, but I think those cars with red belts got sent out to dealers as normal.

All this stuff is so funny looking back at it, a lot of responsibility for a young kid just of college on his own in the middle of the night. So many stories. A complete contrast to the day job in the office.

### **Dave Handley**

Brian Johnson hello Brian - I really do enjoy reading your posts as I'm sure many of us can remember similar situations . The red seat belt story had me in stitches it would be interesting to hear from Keith Adams if any AR online people know if any AR non MG cars exist with red belts .

The "propagating a disk crash " story Gave me some shivers as I remember other similar cases . We also had a fly crushed on disk surface which caused a few problems . My favourite story was from an Op on evening shift who removed a disk and as he turned around to pick up another just managed to stop an over zealous cleaner using a wet soapy sponge to clean inside the disk drive . My favourite " unconfirmed myth" is of another op bored on nights decided to take a disk drive apart " to see how it worked " after several hours of trying to put it together and failing - he stuffed all the parts back in . He then called the engineer reporting that drive was making a funny noise ! Its a story I've heard several times - so may just be an urban myth . Please keep these anecdotes coming - its one of the reasons for setting up this group.

Keith Adams - over to you Keith - I reckon there are some stories her for you

### **Brian Johnson**

Dave Handley they were not AR cars, they erm were a famous luxury brand made in Coventry.

### **Dave Handley**

Oh dear - that's much worse .

### **Brian Johnson**

Dave Handley\_\_lol, oh there's much more scandal than that...