

New Firm Changes the High Performance Tape Game

It is not often that a single announcement of a new product can change the outlook in the computer industry. It is even less often that it can do so when the announcement is made by a firm that no one has ever heard of. So when that apparently happened,

The Taylor Report by Alan Taylor



a couple of weeks ago, I thought it was well worthwhile spending the time to go and check matters out for you. After all, it could have been a half-baked announcement. It wasn't.

PE Tapes From STC

The announcement was about some new high performance tape drives. These are the systems that work from 90,000 byte/sec up through 320,000 byte/sec. Normally they use pulse encoding (PE) and for practical purposes they have been available only from IBM in the past.

The firm was Storage Technology Corp. (STC), which is in Boulder, Colo. The attraction of the announcement was that it appeared to suggest that the firm both had technical capability in this highly sophisticated area, and was determined to try to bring both the price of the units down and also to improve the usefulness of them for the user installation.

The key importance was of course in the second part — increasing the usefulness of PE

From the technical side I personally had met only one of the people before, Thomas Kavanaugh. Tom had explained the features of the IBM high-speed drives to me at a computer conference earlier. But the credentials of the other former IBM people were pretty well unassailable: former manager of the Magnetic Testing Laboratory, former head of the advanced tape drive department, former superintendent of tape system manufacturing, etc. Lots of high powered sophisticated people were there. This certainly did not look like a "me-too" aimed simply at saving a couple of dollars.

Nor, when I got to Boulder, was it. It might have looked like this when five people got around a kitchen table last August and decided to start a firm. But in April when I was there, the STC high-speed tape drives were working — and the basis of many of the claims of increased flexibility was already there!

Increased flexibility is very im-

portant in this area because it changes the systems equations. Currently, the use of PE tapes is almost as separated from the use of the standard lower performance tapes as that of disk drives are! Installations with the PE tapes find that they often have to maintain two libraries, one for the standard 2400 and one for use on the PE drives. This means that PE is hard to get into.

drive that some of the most advanced tapes currently on the market cannot be used unless the drives concerned are specially altered and then dedicated to the tape concerned. Altogether it is not a straight forward matter at all to get that extra performance. And so looking at the tape systems being offered by Storage Technology Corp it was delightful to find that they did not need anything like the same special handling. The same tapes can be used both on the medium performance drives and on the STC ones. This means that users have an easy transition which actually goes all the way from 7-track use to 9-track, to the PE tapes. Any of the standard tapes available on the market can be used. This again helps the user. And it is a real and immediate help.

But the matter is not restricted to the STC tape drives, either. Although those are all that currently exist, there is also a tape controller under development.



Juan A. Rodriguez, STC's manager of technology, explains the program of compatibility involved in amplitude variations on PE tape to Alan Taylor at the pilot production plant.



Tom Kavanaugh, behind the first STC 2470, explains the specialized servicing facilities being built into the unit.

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Moving tape reels between PE and non-PE drives is also awkward. Moreover, recently it has been found that the amplitude of recordings under PE systems varies so widely from drive to

This has some interesting application implications as well, but we will have to wait until next January before they are detailed.

All in all one of the most interesting — from a user's point of view — of the new items that are being displayed at the Spring Joint. Interesting because it changes the equations and will allow you to use tape more freely and more productively than before. That is the name of the game, and here are some of the new players.

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tapes. That is what the name of the game is. Reducing the price helps but, as someone once said, anyone can always make something a little bit cheaper by doing it a little bit dirtier, so price by itself is not too exciting.