

AN EVANGELIST OF O-O TECHNOLOGY

Mike Charnley-Fisher sees himself as an evangelist for object-oriented technology within the Trafalgar House Group - a subject on which he will speak at next month's Open Exchange event. He talks to Kate Oakley

As is often the case in the computer industry, each new wave of technology has its zealots who claim it is the answer to all our problems and its sceptics who say it's just a new name for an old set of techniques. Nowhere is this more apparent than in object-oriented programming.

As more users start evaluating the technology, however, a new breed of realist appears. People who say: yes it is just a new name for some old techniques, but it can be used to solve a lot, if not all, of our problems.

Among these realists is Mike Charnley-Fisher, principal engineer, piping layout and computer aided engineering, at the Trafalgar House Group. Work in this area is still at the planning stage, but his background and experience qualify him to assess the contribution object-oriented technology can make.

He graduated with degrees in metallurgy and applied mechanics which equipped him for a career in mechanical engineering - but his hobby was computers. Working as a mechanical engineer, he became frustrated with doing things manually and made his feelings clear to his bosses who asked him to write some engineering software for a weight control system.

Although this allowed him to turn a hobby into a job, he returned to engineering. Next, he became heavily involved in his company's plans to automate its entire design activities, then returned to engineering again. "I didn't want to become a computer expert," he says.

His interest in computers was roused again by the emergence of the transputer - then available in the form of the Atari transputer workstation. "It offered 50 MIPS, ran X software and cost around £3,000 - and that was six years ago," he says.

The machine failed to take off despite this, perhaps because it was ahead of its time. Charnley-Fisher moved on to run a company specialising in real-time energy management systems, which in turn lead to a "heavy interest" in C++.

He brought the interest in C++ to John Brown Engineering, part of Trafalgar House, which he joined in May 1991, and soon became involved in work that John Brown was carrying out in conjunction with BP.

The focus of the work was to reduce costs during the design and specification of engineering projects and it centred on issues such as document management and imaging. Charnley-Fisher maintains that "document management is no different from object management", which in turn reminds him of much of the work he did earlier in parallel processing.

He is now working on an internal project for Trafalgar House on document management - "the paperless office about 20 years after it was first promised" he says.

Despite his fascination with object technology, Charnley-Fisher is not enthusiastic about every modish topic in the IT world. The idea of distributed applications, for instance is, he thinks, overkill: "Peer-to-peer networking is OK within groups



Trafalgar House: will it endorse object-oriented technology?

and electronic mail is enough, you don't need huge integrated databases."

He says the PC model as still the most effective way to increase productivity: "People are basically selfish and will use technology if they can see the individual benefits."

He dismisses talk of "islands of automation" and says it is not a problem as long as you have good communications between PCs in the shape of electronic mail and products such as Microsoft's OLE (object linking and embedding).

He is a big Microsoft fan and says time is running out for Unix on the desktop. "The Unix camp could afford to mess around until the beginning of 1991, but by then Windows was established and Microsoft is getting its act together at such a rate that it could kill Unix."

He says Unix programmers, are lazy: "They demand a lot of resources to do simple things, for example X-Windows which needs a crazy amount of memory." Even in hardware terms, he feels the PC can win out: "For 2D modelling the 486 is OK and for 3D I'm prepared to wait for Microsoft NT to be available on a Risc machine."

Despite the crashing price of Risc workstations, he says they will never be cheap enough to

replace the PC and he says X-terminals are "silly, turning PC users back into data operators."

One of the necessary conditions for an object-oriented document system is, he says, a decent database environment. "Paradox for Windows is OK," he says, though previous PC databases were table managers not databases. "They could do things with one or two tables but there was no referential integrity. The relational model, if properly implemented, is fully capable of replicating all object-oriented constructs that I'm familiar with." However, he says, not all relational databases are worthy of the name.

He views object oriented programming as more a state of mind than a technology. He does not think current programmers necessarily need training to turn them into object oriented programmers, it is more of a cultural change, though he admits it took him two years to get into the object-oriented mindset.

"Object-oriented programming is an approach," he says. "Anything can be done in it, it's just that I favour object methods over structured methods and object languages over standard languages. Look at Paradox and Excel, they're both as good as each other but Paradox can be altered in six months while it takes Microsoft 18 months to change Excel."

Charnley-Fisher hopes Trafalgar House will take his ideas on object-oriented technology to heart, though he admits he has an "evangelist" role at the moment. If he succeeds it will demonstrate that object-oriented technology really is becoming acceptable in the heart of the corporate world

Mike Charnley-Fisher will speak at the Open Exchange conference in London on 11 June 1992 on choosing a graphical user interface and how to use it in object-oriented computing.