Alan Highet describes his own experiences of spreading the Acorn word in a world of PCs and Apples.

I wonder how many of you find yourself in the same situation as myself - a lone Acorn user within an environment swamped with PCs? And how many of you wish you could do something to change it? Well, let me explain what I have done so far to try and redress the balance.

Firstly, let me say that I do not think that the IBM PC is rubbish, but only that it is still tied down to outdated architecture which survives only through an unwillingness among users to try something new. Acorn however are going along the right lines with open architecture allowing the user to decide which operating system best suits his needs for a particular task, rather than being tied to the hardware vendor. This also means that you have the pick of all the software on the market regardless of the platform required to run it.

I work for The Television House, a television production facility, which is part of the Central Television Group. I was promoted, if that s the right word, to the position of Design Estimator about four years ago and, at that time, the head of department was very keen to be seen to be using computers. Knowing my interests, he immediately suggested the purchase of a computer to aid our department in its task which was, and is, the estimation of material and labour costs for the construction of scenery and the subsequent tracking of actual costs during construction.

Being new to the job I suggested a few months postponement of any purchase during which time the suitability of computerisation could be assessed and regard could be made to the appropriate system to buy, although I hoped to be able to recommend Acorn.

It soon became evident that a computer would be very useful in the collation of all the data although, as the other member of the department had no computer experience, every task undertaken on the computer would need to be duplicated on paper, at least to start with.

Eventually I decided on an A410 with 4Mb memory and an ARM3 along with a hi-res monitor, a laser printer and some suitable software. To my surprise the purchase was agreed immediately with no questions being raised as to whether an IBM PC would be more suitable. It was only later that I realised that nobody involved really knew anything about computers and I could have bought anything without difficult questions being asked.

In the following years the computer side of the company became slightly more organised with someone who knew about computers being put in charge, and a preferred supplier was chosen for all desktop and portable machines. Within a few years two networked mainframe computer systems were installed which ran two totally different systems. One was a VAX/VMS system with a 132 column display while the other was a DEC system with an 80 column screen. For various reasons this meant that most PCs were unable to access both systems (although they can now under Windows) while my Acorn didn t seem to have any trouble even with PD software. One up to Acorn!

During this time I was told that if I had to replace my machine for any reason I would almost certainly have to buy a PC. When I asked why, I got the

usual response that it was industry standard , which would give me, amongst other things, file compatibility. In the four years since then I have never had to swap a file for company business! Mind you, if I had needed to read other files, most software on the Acorn platform will read files from the more well known PC products, although this could still improve. I was also made aware that technical support would not be available for an Acorn machine through our service contract. This hasn t been a problem as any support I have needed has been found within the Acorn dealership or from the largely free technical support from suppliers.

Things have changed a lot recently with the formation of our Production Facilities Company and a much reduced workforce. Purchasing decisions are made by a small management group who understand each person s individual requirements for a computer. I was very pleased, therefore, to find that when I asked to part exchange my A410 for a Risc PC there was no problem at all, although the availability of the PC card may have swayed some people. I am now trying to persuade our graphics department to at least try out a Risc PC as I feel they would benefit from its superb graphics capability as well as its impressive speed.

At the the moment they use a large Amiga for any DTP work while all their graphics work is performed on a dedicated machine such as HAL. They have sought quotes on an Apple Quadra along with various software packages and a flatbed scanner. The best quote they received was approximately £8800 and this was heavily discounted. In one hour I had put together a comparable Acorn package which retailed at £6300 - a not insignificant saving! Add to this the low cost professional broadcast video cards soon to be available, the possible links to Quantel graphics machines and the Eidos video editing software and you have a very powerful, low cost, machine. Unfortunately price is not the only criterion and one of the main objections to buying anything other than an Apple is that all printers and all serious graphic designers use Apples. I m afraid this doesn t hold much sway with me as most printers work primarily with PostScript files which are machine independent. There are also some good professional printing houses that accept Acorn files and are apparently cheaper than some of the Apple-based houses.

As far as designers using Apples, well this is true, but only because there has been no serious contender until recently. With the advent of fast graphical PCs and the new Acorn machines there is no excuse for staying with Apple unless that s what you have been used to. In our case this is not true as none of the graphic artists are Apple trained and therefore have no prejudices one way or the other.

While I m on the subject, we have all heard Acorn s views about Apple s recent advertising campaign for the PowerPC but I think their suppliers need taking to task as well. The company who quoted for our graphics department said that the software is so easy to use you will be working with it productively within the day! In my view any software that is totally usable in one day isn t worth having!

On a more cheerful note I must say that, although I own the only Acorn machine in The Television House, there are others that have appeared every so often. They are brought in by external companies who use them to control various items for games shows. The latest of these is a show called Body Heat . For this show a huge range of gym equipment was wired up to an A5000 through proprietary interfaces to animate Amiga generated graphics.

Nearly all games shows on television have a computer running some aspect of the show and Acorn seem to be one of the most popular. The first show I remember was The Price is Right which ran on two Beebs.

However, not all shows are computerised. One of our longest running shows, Blockbusters , was originally produced long before sophisticated