The OECD has just published its first "Information Technology Outlook", which brings together a wealth of comparable data on the world’s information technology (IT) sector. This statistical collection should serve as a source for basic data, covering a variety of subjects related to IT, and assist the analysis of the IT sector.

The world is estimated to have spent slightly more than US$305 billion on information technology-related products and services in 1990. Six countries make up 80% of information technology spending. This highly concentrated group, ranked by size, includes the United States (34%), Japan (19%), Germany (7%), France (6%), the United Kingdom (6%) and Italy (4%). The three Nordic countries, Sweden, Norway and Finland, as well as Denmark and Switzerland, have the highest IT spending per capita of all OECD Member countries.

Between 1989 and 1990, the growth in the world’s IT market is estimated at 12%. The software market accounted for the majority of this growth. Currently "down-sizing", a trend towards smaller-sized computers with higher cost performance, is stripping the margins of the world’s computer manufacturers.

The increased capacity of the PC at a lower price, and the interconnectivity of work stations has made it feasible for business to provide a machine for use by almost every employee as well as make the home computer market more affordable. This proliferation of machinery has also increased the data communications via the public telecommunications networks, both for voice telephony and data communications. The demand for data communications equipment, such as modems and communications servers, will in most cases increase with the growth in the PC and work station market. Policy makers in telecommunications infrastructure should be aware of the increasing demand by data communications users, and the future impact this will have on network planning and technological specifications of the public network.
In this changing scenario, what is the role for governments? Unlike telecommunications, the IT sector has never been a monopoly subject to government regulations. Governments have taken an interest in national production of information technology, and more recently in its implementation. In the 1980s, the focal point of most national IT policies was, in general, to support the supply side, e.g. IT R&D and production of IT components. The mid-1980s brought about a shift in the role of governments, which began to emphasise the importance of the demand side, e.g. the promotion of industrial applications of IT. Today, governments have broadened their scope to include international and regional co-operation in IT development. Mutual co-operation is also apparent in the private sector, with an increased number of mergers, alliances and joint ventures.

Associated with increased IT use, rules to facilitate development and exploitation of IT are also developing rapidly on both national and international levels. The protection of personal data and privacy, and the security of information systems are examples of rules currently being legislated in an increasing number of Member countries. As IT-based systems link users across national boundaries, the development of common international rules for the use of electronic information systems is one of the major tasks for IT policy-makers.

Journalists may obtain a copy of the report from the OECD Press Division, 2 rue André Pascal, 75775 Paris cedex 16 (tel. 45 24 80 88 or 80 89).

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"Information Technology Outlook - 1992"
46 pages, OECD, Paris 1992
F120; £16; US$30; DM48
ISBN 92-64-03527-3 (93 92 01 3)
Available from the OECD Publications Distributors - see attached list.

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