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PRODUCT SUMMARY

COM/8I

Company: Digiboard, 6751 Oxford St., St. Louis Park, MN 55426; (800) 344-4273, (612) 922-8055.
List Price: $1,195.
Characteristics: Eight-port, full-size, 16-bit smart board with 256K of RAM.
Pros: Well-built, intelligent board; knowledgeable technical support.
Cons: Heavy imposition on main system CPU; weak documentation.
Summary: Solid board whose performance doesn't match that of its direct competitors.

The $1,295 Arnet Smartport is the most full-featured and solidly performing board in this comparison.

PRODUCT SUMMARY

PLUS 8

Company: Stargate Inc., 29300 Aurora Road, Bentley Park S., Solon, OH 44139; (800) STARGAT, (216) 349-1860.
List Price: $620.
Characteristics: Eight-port, full-size, 8-bit dumb board with a multiplexing processor.
Pros: Stable performer; inexpensive.
Cons: None significant.
Summary: Middle-of-the-road board at a reasonable price; a good value.

In spite of its unimpressive showing in the hardware benchmark tests, the Com/8i took only 17 minutes and 29 seconds to transmit a 500K file at 9,600 bps, a time equal to those of most of its competitors and one that earns the Com/8i a score of satisfactory for data transfer.

Documentation for the Com/8i included installation instructions for novices. Those instructions were more advanced than some of the other manuals' directions for new users. Although the manual contained a couple of wiring diagrams, it offered no photos or sketches of the board. There was no list of error messages or troubleshooting information. The manual did have a table of contents but no index or glossary. We rate it satisfactory.

Jumpers for the Com/8i are set along the bottom edge of the board, which means you have to remove the board in order to reset or adjust them. On the positive side, a setup procedure automatically installs the software drivers, saving a potentially significant amount of time and hassle. The cabling is hydra-style, with cables from eight terminal ports joining into one connector on the board. Digiboard labels its cables (1 to 8) — a small but much appreciated touch. Setting up the board took a standard 15 minutes. We rate both setup and ease of use good.

With solid construction and good layout, the Com/8i has no workmanship problems. We found no extra wiring or components added after manufacture. Even the cabling was generous in length and well-constructed. Workmanship earns a very good score.

Digiboard offers a one-year warranty on the Com/8i. The company handles repairs directly, with a maximum turnaround time of five days. Currently there are no optional support plans or extended warranties for the board. These support policies are satisfactory.

Technical support is offered by Digiboard at no cost, but the call is not toll free. The technician we spoke with impressed us with his knowledge of the board and its capabilities. We received courteous and complete help that was by far the best we got from any of the vendors. Another plus is that the support line maintains semi-extended hours (8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Central time). Technical support was very good.

For $1,195, Digiboard's Com/8i offers average performance along with the features of a more advanced board. The Com/8i is well-built and backed by solid technical support. However, the $100 savings compared to the Arnet board does not offset the Com/8i's slower performance. We rate value satisfactory.

Stargate Plus 8

Balanced between the more full-featured boards and the basic AST Fourport/xn, Stargate's Plus 8 has eight asynchronous ports and a small 8051 multiplexing processor with a 32K ROM. The board is full-sized but requires only an 8-bit slot. It supports 10 operating environments (two more than the Digiboard Com/8i and the Computone AT-8, but four fewer than the Arnet Smartport).

The 500K file transfer at 9,600 bps took 17 minutes and 31 seconds, an average time for all but one of the boards we tested. Data transfer was satisfactory. Under the *InfoWorld* hardware benchmark tests, Stargate clocked in at 1.34 — slightly higher than the AST and Digiboard boards — for a residual CPU power grade of good.

Although the manual's installation instructions were a bit sketchy for novices, the diagrams were clear and easy to follow. The book provided no information about error messages or troubleshooting. The manual was short enough, and its table of contents complete enough, that in spite of its lack of an index or glossary, we rated it satisfactory.

The Stargate board's switches are on the bottom of the board and thus not accessible while the board is in a slot. Drivers for the Plus 8 are on a chip on the board. However, instead of enabling them with a software program, you do it via a Xenix utility. This procedure was different than that for the other boards but not necessarily more difficult. It took us 15 minutes to set up the Plus 8, timed from opening the box to running the operating system. Setup was good, and ease of use was satisfactory.

Physically, the Plus 8 was very solid. We found the board's layout adequate, with no last-minute additions. Stargate uses a connector box similar to Arnet's, but all its cabling is round, rather than ribbon-style (flat). Overall, workmanship was good.

The Plus 8 comes with a 12-month warranty. Both Stargate and local dealers can handle repairs, and they promise 48-hour turnaround. No extended warranties or optional support plans are available. These support policies are satisfactory.

Stargate's technical support is free — both the call and the service. On one call we left a message which was later returned. Another time we were put on hold for a full five minutes before a technician answered. Our questions were answered completely, and the technicians were polite. We rate technical support good.

The list price of the Stargate Plus 8 is $620, $125 higher than its nearest competitor, the AST Fourport/xn. The additional hundred-odd dollars give you comparable performance but four more ports — certainly a reasonable trade-off.

If you need the eight ports and standard performance but can't make the leap to the more expensive, more full-featured Digiboard or Arnet boards, Stargate provides a viable solution and good value.

Computone Intelliport AT-8

The fifth board we tested was the Computone Systems Intelliport AT-8. This smart board has a 10-MHz 80186 processor and up to 128K of RAM. It requires a full-length, 16-bit slot and can support several multiuser operating systems.

Unfortunately, this board had severe compatibility problems with the Compaq 386/20, and we couldn't obtain a hardware benchmark test result for it. Also, the software drivers that came with the board showed erratic behavior during testing. We connected four terminals and tried to upload our 500K ASCII file simultaneously from all four terminals. The first terminal ran at full speed; the second and third terminals transferred the information at about half the normal data transfer rate; and the fourth terminal sent two characters and then froze, awaiting a signal from the board that would allow it to resume. The first terminal transmitted the file in the typical 17 minutes and 30 seconds. The second and third terminals then picked up the pace a little, finishing their tasks after a total of 28 minutes had passed. The fourth terminal finally kicked in after all other activity had ceased, and limped along at a maximum rate of 300 bps. After an hour of that, we stopped the test.

At this point, we contacted Computone and explained our problem. The technician we spoke to said that the board had been having problems with the 20-MHz version of the Compaq 386. She also told us that a new version of the software would correct the problem.

We received that new software three days later. After

INFO WORLD THE PC NEWS WEEKLY

MULTIPORT BOARDS • REPORT CARD

		Arnet Smartport	AST Fourport/xn	Digiboard Com/8i	Stargate Plus 8	Computone Intelliport AT-8
Performance						
Data transfer	(125)	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Unacceptable
Residual CPU power	(150)	Excellent	Good	Good	Good	[1]
Hardware compatibility	(125)	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Unacceptable
Documentation	(75)	Good	Very Good	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Poor
Ease of use	(150)	Very Good	Good	Good	Satisfactory	Very Good
Setup	(100)	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good
Serviceability						
Workmanship	(50)	Very Good	Satisfactory	Good	Good	Good
Support policies	(50)	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Good
Technical support	(50)	Very Good	Poor	Good	Good	Very Good
Value	(125)	Very Good	Good	Satisfactory	Good	[2]
Final scores		**7.7**	**6.4**	**6.2**	**6.2**	[3]

[1] The Computone board's incompatibility with the Compaq 386/20 made it impossible to determine residual CPU performance.
[2] Lack of an accurate residual CPU measurement prevented a determination of value.
[3] The lack of scores for residual CPU performance and value precluded a final numerical rating.

GUIDE TO REPORT CARD SCORES

InfoWorld gives ratings only to finished, production versions of products, never to beta test versions.

All products receive ratings ranging from unacceptable to excellent. Scores are derived by multiplying the weighting (in parentheses) of each criterion by its rating, where:

Excellent = 1.0
Very Good = 0.75
Good = 0.625
Satisfactory = 0.5
Poor = 0.25
Unacceptable or **N/A** = 0.0

Scores are summed, divided by 100, and rounded down to one decimal place to yield the total score out of a maximum possible score of 10 (plus bonus). Final scores should be judged as follows:

9 - 10 Excellent: *Tops in its class.*
7 - 8.9 Very Good: *Meets all essential criteria and offers significant advantages.*
6 - 6.9 Good: *Meets essential criteria and includes some special features.*
5 - 5.9 Satisfactory: *Meets essential criteria.*
3 - 4.9 Poor: *Falls short in essential areas.*
0 - 2.9 Unacceptable: *Fails to meet minimum standards.*

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