



A Parable: The Bear and the Hikers

by Morris D. Carey

Two guys were hiking through the forest when they came upon a grizzly bear. As the huge bear reared up on its hind legs, one of the hikers took off his backpack, pulled out some running shoes, sat down, and began to put them on. "You'll never be able to outrun the bear!" yelled the second hiker. "I don't have to outrun the bear," the first hiker replied. "I only have to outrun you!"

Like the first hiker, you can "outrun" your competition by using a computer.

Of course, getting started in computing is confusing. You'll have lots of questions, and, most of all, you'll worry that the computer and programs you buy will be instantly obsolete.

Well, you can stop worrying. I can guarantee you that your hardware and software will be "antique" before you can even learn to fully use them.

But that's okay. That's how micro-computing works.

Computer technology literally never stops. Every week, the hardware and software companies make changes that offer new speed, more accuracy, and better efficiency.

So don't sit there waiting for the changes to stop—they won't. You have to start somewhere. And we all face the same situation.

When I bought my first computer, hard disks (high-capacity storage devices) were not affordable. About a year later, they came onto the market for a whopping \$4,000. It was a lot of money, but I bought one. A year later, the price was only \$1,500, and I was mad.

I was angry that I had purchased the hard disk too soon. But then I realized that the extra year of using it gave me a head start on everybody else. In that time, I had gotten the hard disk set up and running bug-free, I had learned to

properly use the hardware and software, and I had built a database.

When I bought my accounting software seven years ago, I was so happy. It worked great and it did what we needed to do. And, now, even though it isn't nearly as powerful as the programs available today, it still does the job well and it is likely to be useful for several more years.

The moral of the story: There's no time like the present to get a computer. Get your "running shoes" and outrun the competition.

Watch Out for the Other Guys

When I recommend software for beginners, I like to suggest products from major manufacturers, companies that are time-tested and stable. This way, I know you'll be provided with updates as the technology improves. I'm talking about programs like Lotus 1-2-3, dBase, WordStar, Profit Builder Plus, Software Shop Systems, Small Systems Design, Master Builder, CMS Espri, etc. I often commend smaller companies for creative insight when it comes to innovations in computer programs. But these companies sometimes go broke as a result of ineffective marketing. The company, and its ability to weather good times and bad, is as important as the quality of the software. This is especially true with accounting programs that require yearly tax table updates.

The best buy isn't always the cheapest software or the latest innovation. Actually, it is usually the other way around. A smart software shopper will give a company offering "new and improved" programs some time to test their product and refine it.

In my 1987 software review in the now defunct *Remodeling Contractor*

magazine, I named Construction Management Systems (CMS) and National Computer Estimating (NCE) the picks of the litter. It was mainly because both companies demonstrated marketing expertise, which, in my opinion, has a lot to do with staying power in the software business. Fortunately, both companies are still in business and improving their software as fast as they can to respond to changes in technology.

Finding a Database

I don't like the databases that come with estimating software programs. In my opinion, estimating is as specific as the estimator. In addition to the sample database that comes with an estimating program, you may want other help. Look into a book called the *1990 National Construction Estimator*, \$19.95, published by Craftsman Book Company, 6058 Corte Del Cedro, Carlsbad, CA 92009. Craftsman also offers other good titles: *Construction Estimating Reference Data* (I like this one), *1990 Berger Building Cost File*, and the *1990 Electrical Construction Estimator*. Remember—I only offer these reference material suggestions as guides to help you create your own database. Without your own modifications, the information is useless.

Readers Write

Kristy Calan, of Boston, Mass., writes:

We are a small general contracting business specializing in remodeling and restoration of older homes. We are currently using Small Systems Design software to help us track job costs, accounting, and payroll. Unfortunately, the SSD estimating program is not in line with our own methods, and we are considering using a database management system to customize an estimating program that can then export data to SSD accounting and payroll. I would greatly appreciate any other ideas or options you might be able to present as potential solutions to our problem.

Although SSD now makes its own estimating system, that wasn't always the case. SSD used to sell CMS's Espri as its own. There is a very good chance that the electronic interface still exists. Check with your SSD tech support

person. If there is no interface, you may still be able to use Espri. CMS's budget interface feature outputs in comma-delimited ASCII. Interfacing the already estimated data with your database management system would be far more simple than trying to create an entire estimating system—especially one as powerful as Espri.

Sherry Abate, of Redondo Beach, Calif., writes:

My husband Frank is a general contractor primarily dealing in residential remodels. For him, the bidding function is the worst part of his work. He devotes numerous hours to just one set of plans, often only to be told that he didn't get the job. We're in the market now for a computer system and would really appreciate your suggestions as to the various software programs available to help us streamline the bidding process.

The fact that Frank isn't getting all the jobs he bids probably means that he knows what he's doing and his bids are correct. Remodeling industry statistics indicate that the average ratio of contracts to jobs bid is one out of five, or 20%. My brother and I shoot for about 23% in our remodeling company.

After several months of hard work (converting your current hand-method tick sheet into one that's computer-based) you should be able to create very sophisticated estimates in less than half the time they currently take. Expect to spend eons of time setting up, but once you are organized, look out! You'll be able to cut your time at the estimating table by at least 50%, and your accuracy will improve. That's what happened to me seven years ago.

Look at past columns I've written for JLC, starting in May 1989, on how to purchase estimating software, and how to purchase basic hardware and basic software. ■

Morris D. Carey is a partner with Carey Bros. Construction, a successful remodeling firm based in California. In addition, he is an author and lecturer and has reviewed hundreds of construction-related computer products. If you have a question about computing in construction, address it to State-of-the-Art Contractor, c/o JLC, RR #2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477.