

Macintosh Computers Work for Construction Too

by Craig Savage

If you stopped at the computer icon (icons are little pictures) that identifies the State-of-the-Art Contractor feature expecting another one of Morris Carey's fine columns, please beware.

This column was not created on — or for — an IBM PC.

The machine I use, and will write about every other month, is what its maker Apple Computer Co. once described as the "computer for the rest of us" — the Macintosh.

To say that I use a Macintosh is an understatement. I run my business entirely on the Mac, using it for letters, estimates, accounting, and payroll. I have also used my Macintosh to create market plans, publish a newsletter, and forecast business trends. It can fill out forms, address mailings, and help design roads. It also sends and receives faxes, exchanges data with branch offices, and calculates simple beam stresses. It even occasionally relieves human stress with eco-sensitive games such as *Sim City* and *Balance of Planet*.

Any way I figure it, the Macintosh computer is the most useful tool I own. For this old finish carpenter turned paper-pushing contractor, the ease of learning Macintosh software has made it possible for me to do things that I would not have considered on an IBM-compatible PC. It is not that a PC is unable to do the same tasks, it just takes much longer to learn how to do that work on an IBM.

Early Lack of Software Made Mac Users Strong

When the Macintosh computer was introduced about five years ago, it was not considered a serious business machine. At that time, the greatest limitation was the lack of Mac software. While IBM-compatible computer users were enjoying a selection of programs, Mac users had to be creative in their approach to construction data management.

For instance four years ago, when no estimating programs were available for the Mac, I built estimator programs on Excel by Microsoft, a powerful and easy-to-use spreadsheet. Excel is still a useful program, and now that it is also available for IBM-compatible computers, it is definitely the spreadsheet to have for Macintosh users. There is even a large library of inexpensive Excel templates available from Heiser Software (P.O. Box 232019, Pleasant Hill, CA 94523; 800/888-7667) that turn the empty spreadsheet into everything from accounting systems to staircase calculators.

It is possible to integrate these simple templates into a custom package that runs your entire business. Importing and exporting coherent data from one program to another, which I call "clipboard thinking," is how Mac builders have survived the lack of totally integrated construction programs.

Cutting data from one document; transferring it to the clipboard; and pasting it into the next document can move information between a variety of programs. For instance, data can be "cut and pasted" from CAD programs to project management software; from accounting programs to spreadsheets; and from spreadsheets sometimes back into accounting programs.

Sometimes limitations of the software may require entering the information twice, but when the program costs \$300 instead of \$3,000, you can justify a little extra typing.

Another benefit of clipboard computing is that it allows users to develop reports that satisfy very specific and individual needs. For example, I consider cash flow an important business indicator. I want to know every night if cash on hand is within a certain level.

While my generic accounting program does 95% of what I need, it won't chart the swings in my checking account balance. But by exporting the balance sheet computed by that program to an Excel template set up to chart that cash account, it is easy for me to determine how much cash I need in my checking account for a particular week. It also tells me how much money can be conveniently put in high-yield certificates of deposit or U.S. Treasury notes.

Another example of the advantages of this flexibility is with estimates. My estimates can contain from 25 to 75 line items. The plumbing might be one line, based on a lump-sum bid. The Sheetrock, on the other hand, is done half by my crew (they do the hanging) while the taping and texturing is done by a subcontractor.

I've looked at over a dozen integrated programs available on the Mac but my custom estimator, made as a template in the Excel spreadsheet, handles these hybrid estimating requirements best.

In this case, I don't need a full-blown integrated accounting, estimating, job costing, and nose-wiping program to track these jobs.

Instead, a few home-brewed templates — one to estimate, one to progressively bill the client, and one to job cost — are all I need to keep a close eye on the progress of each job and keep track of cash flow.

Macs Not Called Toys Anymore

In subsequent articles, I'll show you how builders are doing some amazing things with the Macintosh, a computer some dared to call a toy. No one is calling the new Mac II series of computers toys.

The Mac IIx, Apple's warp speed workstation redraws images on my twin-page monitor so fast that I only hear it happen, my eyes can't see it change. Sometimes I'll sit there staring at the screen waiting for something to happen and then realize that it already has.

With the powerful Macs have come powerful integrated programs. In fact *Macintosh Construction Forum*, a newsletter I publish, puts out a product directory that lists over 450

construction-related applications for the Mac. Believe me, that is enough for most of us.

It is going to be my job in the following issues to show you how these Macintosh programs can help you run your construction business.

I'll be reviewing software and hardware, passing on scuttlebutt from the job site, the office, and the tailgate, and generally trying to keep you informed about the many uses

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to which you can put your own machines. I'll pass on news and rumors like this one: Sony and Apple are reported to be planning a joint effort to produce a notebook-sized Mac, which will reportedly be competitively priced.

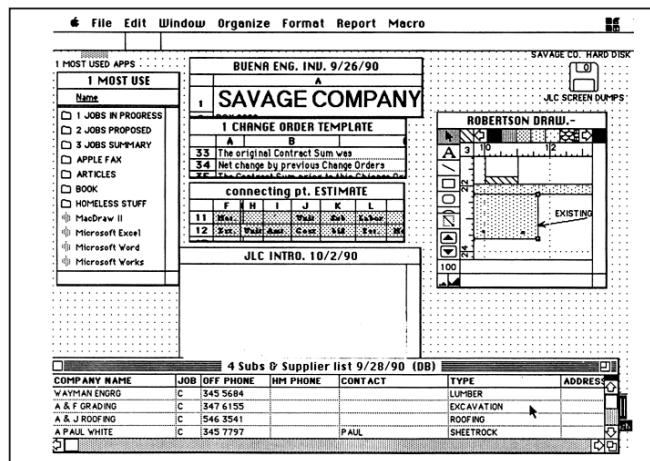
By the time you read this, the new Macintosh line will be available.

Apple hopes that the three machines, priced much lower than earlier versions, will help bring the Mac into the mainstream of affordable personal computing. We'll be looking at them as soon as Apple sees fit to loan me one.

I'll occasionally mention books although this Mac user judges a program largely by how little the accompanying manual is needed. Books can suggest a program is too complicated to be effective. However, I recommend the latest edition of *The Macintosh Bible*, which is chock full of hard-earned wisdom. More than 1,100 pages, this tome will tell you all you need to know about the Macintosh.

I hope to make this column as much fun for you to read as it is for me to write. But I need your help. Let me know about how you use your computers in your business, and don't hesitate to ask a question. Please keep the mail flowing. ■

Craig Savage, a longtime building contractor and Macintosh user, owns Savage Co. in Palm Desert, Calif., and publishes the Macintosh Construction Forum, P.O. Box 1278, Sandpoint, ID 83864. If you have a question or comment, write to Craig Savage, JLC, RR#2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477.



Macintosh users can keep several files or programs visible and accessible simultaneously. On this screen, a menu of programs, an estimate file, a database file, a design file, and a copy of this column can all be opened with a click of the mouse button.