



Computers: Myth vs. Reality

by Carl Hagstrom

If you're a small contractor thinking of purchasing a computer, you've probably had salespeople make pie-in-the-sky predictions about all the time and money you'll save, and you've probably heard old-timers grunt that you're better off spending the money on "real" tools. To gain some perspective, imagine that you've gotten a call from a couple who would like a price on a house. Consider these two scenarios:

Scenario #1. You meet with them, take their plans back to the office, and work up an estimate. Since you don't own a computer, you spend three days working up a price. You deliver it to the couple and never hear from them again.

Scenario #2. You meet with them, take their plans back to the office, and fire up your computer. You key in a few cosmic commands, and sit back and sip a beer while your printer spits out a complete bid package. The clients are so impressed that you got the bid back to them the same afternoon that they award you the contract on the spot.

Sound too good to be true? I'd have to agree with you. In the hours I've spent at the keyboard in the last three years, I've discovered that computer programs aren't much different from the rest of my tools. Some tools save me money, some enable me to do a better job, and some end up wasting a lot of time and money. I've gained enough experience with software to know that you've got to match the tool to the job.

Myth: *Having a word processing program is like having a full-time secretary with a Ph.D. in English.*

Reality: *Word processing programs are only as good as the person who operates them.*

Like a tool, a word processor produces more as the operator gains experience. If you've never used a keyboard, it will take you awhile to come up to speed, but it's worth the effort in the end. Imagine ripping a 12-foot 2x6 lengthwise with a hand saw. That's how you'll feel about preparing handwritten or typed proposals and specifications once you get a word processor.

Word processors are a lot like the jigs you use when building. A

jig takes time to put together and set up, but it compensates for this by speeding up production. A contract form on a word processor is like a woodworking jig: Once it's in place, you can crank one out whenever you need it and easily customize it for a specific job.

Myth: *Computer estimating saves time, eliminates mistakes, increases profits, and puts you light-years ahead of your computer-illiterate competition.*

Reality: *If you don't already have a manual estimating system in place, computer estimating won't save a penny.*

There are lots of estimating programs with databases full of prices, but the thought of using someone else's numbers to price a job scares the pants off me. I've recently started working with an estimating program and have been building my own database for pricing. It's a tedious task, but my hope is that, once in place, it will save time.

Myth: *Computers are magical machines that can run your entire office.*

Reality: *Computers will only enable you to do better what you already do.*

Will a computer save you time? Not at first, but with practice, it will. And with help from an experienced user, you will learn faster and reap the benefits sooner.

Will a computer improve your image? I think it will, but it depends on whom you're trying to impress. If your clients aren't computer literate, the razzle-dazzle of a computer-generated printout might impress them. If they use a computer themselves (and the number who do increases every day), then they'll recognize the effort and organizational skills it required to computerize your business. If I were getting ready to hand someone \$200,000, I'd want to be darn sure that he was well-organized and knew what he was doing. Computerized documents sure help on that score. ■

Carl Hagstrom manages Hagstrom Contracting, a residential design/build company located in Montrose, Pa.