

Slay the computer dragon

Computerisation can be terrifying and the choice of software bewildering. But, according to Andrew Don, a recent convert himself, perseverance pays.

I used to be a computer phobic. I was scared that if I pressed the wrong key I would lose all my data. I even thought it might blow up on me!

Every computer manual I read gave me migraine. "It's so easy," the salesmen would tell me when I bought new software. "Any one can pick it up."

Not me. I was the ultimate computer illiterate, I told them.

I was so frustrated that I swore I would become proficient even if it killed me. It nearly did, but two years later I am glad I persevered.

I started off with DOS (Disc Operating System) for Dummies and PC's (Personal Computers) for Dummies from IDG Books which helped me over my initial phobia. Then, armed with my computer guru, a car mechanic called David Smith, I began a fascinating voyage of discovery.

Sometimes I would phone David three or four times a day, screaming down the telephone that my computer had been possessed by Martians.

Computer gurus are worth their weight in gold especially when consultants can cost upwards of £200 a day. But beware the computer gurus who think they know it all when in reality they know little more than you.

Dangerous

As Mark Tindall, sales director with electrical design software company Amtech, says: "While we all try to make software installation easy, if there is a way to mess things up, someone will do it. A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing."

The best software companies provide training, backup and help lines. Never buy products from companies

that do not offer these essential services.

Virtually anything you now perform manually can be computerised: estimation, accounts, payroll, word processing, Computer Aided Drafting (CAD), to mention just a handful.

The converted, such as Terry Robson, managing director of Robson Walker Electriccentre, in Hexham, Northumberland, says he could not operate without software now.

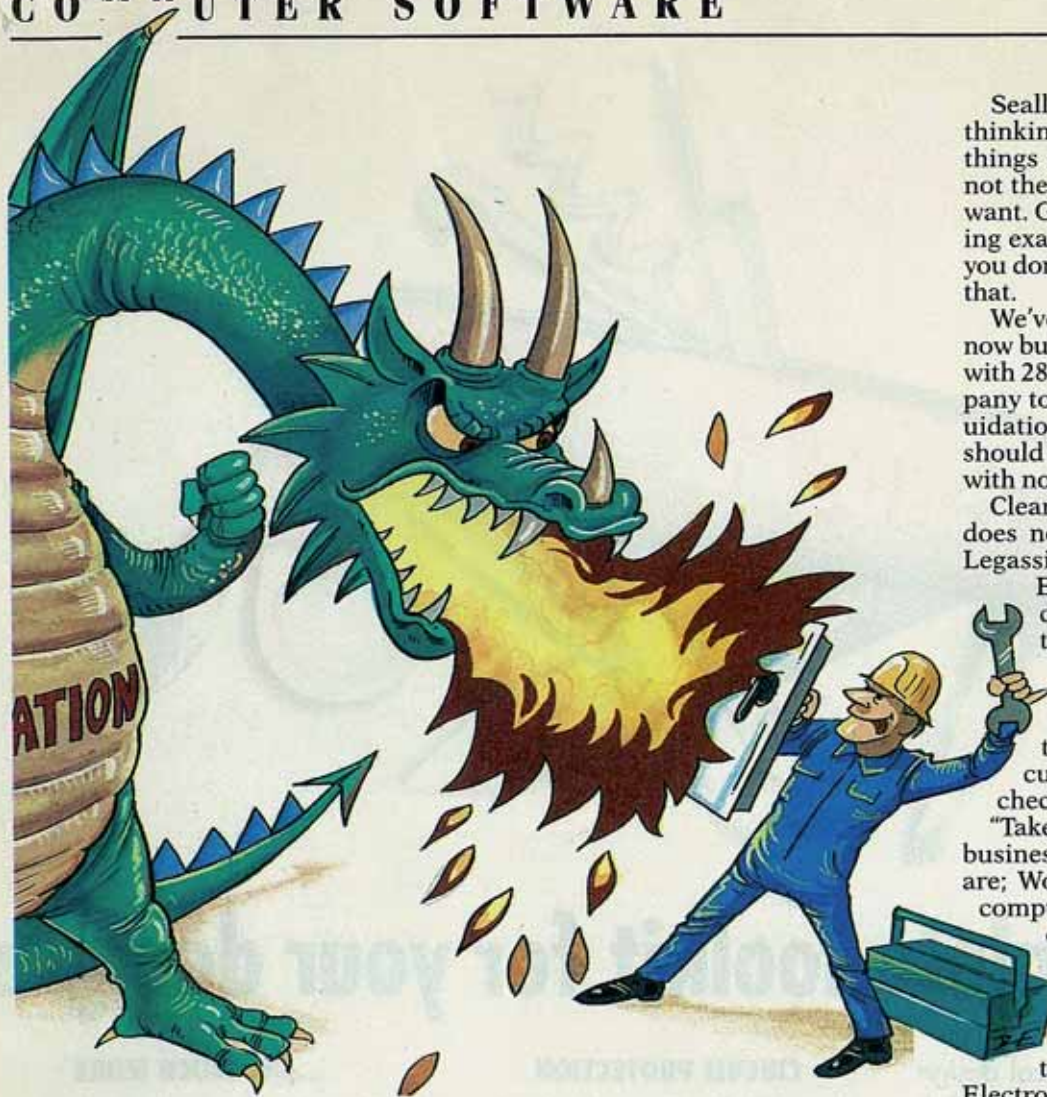
He has a mixture of 486 and 386 PCs (the higher the number the more powerful the computer). "We use them for all business purposes: job costing, estimating, accounts, wages, sales, purchasing, word processing, spread sheets," he says.

Leonard Smith, managing director of Quanatock Electric Company, in Bridgwater, Somerset, says the technical jargon in manuals puts him off.

"We will go into computers but I haven't had time to look round," he says.

Welsh contractor Jones & Whitehead, in Bethesda, Gwynedd, uses Metrotest software for appliance testing.

Turn to page 24



Slay the computer dragon

From page 22

The company uses the Microsoft Windows environment. Windows can be highly confusing if you've been used to non-Windows applications — I certainly found it so — but it does not take too long to master and once you do, it becomes easier to understand how to use packages designed for this system.

You get into your Windows software programs by clicking on icons (pictures) with a mouse.

The brilliant thing about it is you can have different programs running on your screen at the same time and you can switch from program to program and copy data from one to another. You can even transfer data to and from non-Windows and Windows applications.

Some programs such as Word for Windows — an excellent word processing package — are highly memory intensive. Make sure your computer and your printer can handle it before buying.

Jones & Whitehead director Iwan Jones admits that when he computerised six years ago it was "a real upheaval." He said it was just a case

of getting used to it.

Computerisation has definitely saved his company money. "We've got three girls working in the office. If we didn't have the computer software there would be two other people working here. Imagine what that would cost in wages compared with the cost of the network at £5,000."

Computerisation can be a nightmare. When Allbright Electrical, in Portsmouth, Hampshire, computerised four years ago partner Oliver Seall says it was "a very painful and costly process. All the hitches that you ever heard of happened to us such as the wrong hardware, no back-up, wrong software. We got taken to the cleaners. Computers have definitely not benefited our business although it has made wages easier."

Seall advises other companies thinking of computerisation: "Have things done the way you want and not the way the software companies want. Get a contract drawn up detailing exactly what you want and what you don't want. We should have done that."

"We've got the system operating now but we are only a small company with 28 employees. We took one company to court but they went into liquidation. In an ideal world software should do what you want it to do with no compromise."

Clearly, a bitter experience but it does not have to be that way. Sue Legassick, marketing executive at

Estimation, whose software can perform a multitude of tasks such as management reports, 3-dimensional visualisation, labour resource planning, installation drawings and design calculations, has come up with a checklist for the first time user:

"Take a step back and analyse your business; Assess where your needs are; Work out what processes need computerisation first such as the ones that take up most time;

Find out who can help you computerise these areas (press advertising/editorial and recommendation); Visit trade shows such as

Electrotech; Compare different software packages that perform similar functions and the support services - support services that are not subcontract are preferable; Order bespoke (tailor-made) software if you need it but bear in mind that this is relatively expensive.

With the accent now on safety and quality and the need to get value for money, companies looking for an electrical contractor will increasingly want to see evidence of computer calculations and documentation.

If you are tendering for a job and your presentation is as good as another company's, it could be the computerisation that swings it. ●



CableMaster
CONTRACTOR

16th Edition Design Software

TELEPHONE US NOW ON
0234 240088
FOR YOUR
FREE DEMO DISK!

AMTECH Computer Systems Ltd

the PROFESSIONALS number one choice