IS COMPUTER TRAINING NECESSARY?

by Naomi Stevens

Many people are, without realising it, slightly afraid of computers. This is compounded by the usual answer received when querying any computerised account. For instance, if an error is spotted on a bank statement and queried, have you noticed it's never a clerk's mistake, it's always 'The Computer.' It's no wonder people get the impression that computers are clever. They're not; they're stupid! The first and most important thing for any trainer to do, is to get that fact across and so make sure students have no fear of their computers.

When a company is changing from a manual system to a computerised one, many of the staff will never have even touched a home computer, let alone one as advanced as is necessary to run complex accounting packages. These people may not even know the basic information necessary to even start their systems A good computer trainer will slant the course in order to make the trainees familiar with all aspects of the use of the machines.

Many users think that they or their staff should be able to sit in front of their newly delivered computer and be fully conversant with all and any systems installed on it. They are apparently working on the assumption that if they can type, they can use a word processor, or if they can keep manual accounts ledgers, they should automatically know how to use an accounts system. It doesn't work that way.

Is there anyone reading this who has got into a car and driven it without any tuition? Has anyone read a book without first having been to school and learned to read? Any computer system can be easy to use, provided the person using it accepts the fact that first they have to learn how it works.

It is possible for someone to sit down in front of a computer and learn a system by themselves, but unless they are very familiar with other similar systems, they will need to devote considerable time exclusively to trying out the facilities offered by whatever package they wish to learn. The length of time taken will depend on their personal learning ability. (Some people naturally learn faster than others.)

If more than one person is to use a system, each one would have to go through the above learning process, unless the first person to learn tries to train the others. Teaching, however, is also something which has to be learned, so the hypothetical novice learner would have to master two new skills. He or she would also have to be extremely careful not to explain anything about which they are not certain, as they may mislead their students. If skills are learned properly the first time, they are comparatively simple. It is not so easy to unlearn inaccurate information.

Another area which may result in errors, is the translation of the user's requirements into commands and instructions understood by the computer. A professional trainer will be familiar with these as well as with the output from the computer, which may be in a format unfamiliar to the new user.

Realistic management staff realize that it is not viable for one or more of their staff to devote so many valuable hours to learning to use a system, when an easier and quicker

method is available. An experienced trainer will have an in-depth knowledge of the product he or she will be teaching. He or she will know the way different parts of any system should be set, not only to make them work together, but to do so in the most straightforward way possible.

Word processing systems are now taking over from typewriters, but secretarial staff are often not even consulted. They may be presented with a Personal Computer with a word processing package already installed together with a manual supplied by the manufacturer or distributor of the software. Many cope admirable, but only ever master basic features. They certainly never use the program to its full potential and often are not even aware of the myriad of advanced functions that may be available; functions which could save them time, and therefore save their employers money.

Accounting systems, because of the accuracy required, have to be set up according to the specific needs of each user company. It is, therefore, advantageous to that company to not only have their system operational, but also to get the best possible results from the installation of the system.

Many accounts packages are made up of an integrated suite of programs, where each accounting element, is catered for by a separate module or group of programs. When set up correctly, these can be used to provide accurate reports for management. Each module, however, must be set up correctly, both individually and also jointly with the other modules.

The operators of any part of the system, must learn how their specific modules function. They may not need to know how, but they must be aware, that each module interrelates with others. If the relationships between modules is not set up correctly, the integrity of data may be suspect.

The most successful installations use the knowledge and skills of employees currently dealing with the company's routines, combined with the trainer's knowledge of the systems. Each will complement the other. The end result will be a successful parallel run and a smooth changeover to the new system.

Many software houses run a system of testing trainers in their products. In this way they can make sure that when users of their applications contact them asking for advice on training, the trainers they recommend know their product fully. If you're not sure who to contact for your training requirements, ask the manufacturer of the software you're using to see if they run such a scheme.

There really is no question about it. Good training makes software easier to use and in the long run makes good economic sense!