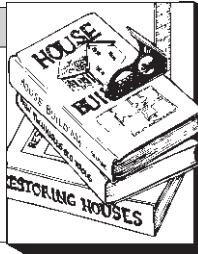# What's a Computer?

Understanding Microcomputers, by Dennis Ashworth; American Assoc. for Vocational Instructional Materials, 120 Driftmier Engr. Ctr., Athens, GA 30602; 29 pages: $6.50 plus $2.00 shipping charge.

If you, like me, are a computer bonehead, this is the book for you. Written as a tradeschool text, *Understanding Microcomputers* covers all the basics in simple, clearly written prose, accompanied by appropriate photos, drawings and cartoons to put even hardcore computerphobes at ease.

Chapter 1 covers the hardware of modern microcomputers, including keyboards and special keys (no, you don't have to know how to type to use a computer), monitors (the TV screen), storage devices (disk drives), and the storage disks. Remember when computers used to store info on punched cards that you couldn't "bend, fold, or mutilate?" Today it's all done on hard or floppy disks. Floppy disks look something like a soft 45 rpm record and perform like the cassettes on your tape recorder. "Peripherals" such as printer, modems (which allow computers to converse with each other), the "mouse," and plotters are also given a quick glance.

Next you are introduced to different kinds of software, which is a set of instructions that tells the machine what to do. It covers where to get it, questions of warranty and updating, and a two-page checklist for software evaluation. The author recommends you buy software that meets your needs first, then shop for machinery that will run the software programs.

Applications are next on the agenda, including *databases* (which sort, list, store and quickly retrieve enormous volumes of information), *word processors* (glorified typewriters), and *spread sheets* (for accounting and other uses including multiple calculations). Finally the author offers guidance on selecting a computer and purchasing supplies. A fine, concise introduction to the subject for those who don't know a "byte" from a bite, complete with self-study questions. ∎

—Paul Hanke

Should I Get One?

Computers: The Builder's New Tool, by Michael Thomsett, Craftsman Book Co, Box 6500 Carlsbad, CA 92008; 1985; 187 pages. $17.75

Michael Thomsett's books have been reviewed before in these pages. His latest offering tackles the fast-growing topic of computers, which is sure to be of increasing interest to builders. Thomsett's stated purpose is to help the reader decide if he or she will benefit from computerization. Not everyone will, as Thomsett points out, but I didn't feel confident to make that decision based solely on my reading of his book, despite some useful advice and general background information he covers.

Thomsett begins with a chapter on the frustration associated with the computer learning curve, but his primary evidence is a case study of a builder whose "frustration" was easily transferred to success by simply taking a class. Next the author recommends *micro*computers (as opposed to their larger or smaller relatives) and outlines the types of software programs that may be of use to builders. He suggests that a breakeven analysis should be done for each routine under consideration, but notes that you "can't really predict" the breakeven point. Thomsett also advises that general contractors who use mostly subs, or people who bid only one job at a time, are not likely candidates for computerization. Partial automation may be the answer for others.

One minor strength of the book is the chapter on flow charts, which the author says will help eliminate errors and hidden costs of automation, but the same benefits would arguably accrue to users of manual systems.

To get the most from a computer, says Thomsett, you should know your needs and set priorities for phased entry into the arena, making sure to consider training time and costs, delivery time, system capacity, compatibility of hardware with your chosen software, support services, and other factors.

To aid in decision making, Thomsett provides a basic introduction to hardware and computer jargon, an overview of software types, and occasional tips. His comments on what to consider when selecting software are most useful, but much more could have been done with software reviews—which consist of three meager examples—while hardware comparisons are intentionally left out of the text altogether.

Anecdotal case studies scattered throughout the book were vague, general and often seemed almost unreal. Illustrations (drawings only) added little if anything to the text. There is a good glossary for novices, but the writing suffers from redundancy, large type, and too much white space.

Overall I think you'd probably learn much more from talking to sales reps, reading computer mags, and querying colleagues who have already taken the plunge than you will from reading Thomsett's book, although you might profit from his rather detailed look at program types and uses. *Computers* definitely isn't the only tool you'll need for making the decision whether to computerize, and it isn't necessarily your first reference either. ∎

—Paul Hanke