



Macintosh Starter Kit

by Craig Savage

I have received several letters from readers asking me to lay out a complete system of hardware and software that will put them on the construction computer "fast track." While I'm happy to give my opinion, I want to begin with a few cautions.

A computer can do virtually every office task imaginable. The good news is that, just because you buy one, you don't necessarily have to do all of them. And you certainly don't have to do them all at the beginning. You can start by using your computer for two or three

Sample Macintosh Systems

Model	Monitor	RAM	Hard Drive	List Price*
Classic	7 inches (incl.)	2 Mb	40 Mb	\$1,499
LC	12 inches mono	2 Mb	40 Mb	\$2,530
Mac IIsi	12 inches color	3 Mb	40 Mb	\$4,498
Mac IIfx	12 inches color	5 Mb	80 Mb	\$6,698

*Actual prices may vary.

First, no two contractors run their businesses the same way. You and I may both be successful framing contractors in the same town, bidding on typical jobs to a typical market, but odds are we run our businesses in completely different ways. I'm talking about the way we do our bids, keep our books, or handle our payroll. It follows that what's good advice for one of us may not be so good for the other. So I hope I don't get a bunch of letters telling me I led unsuspecting contractors into a black hole of computer promises. A computer is simply another tool. I can suggest which tool to buy, but you will still have to learn how, where, and when to use it.

Second, the dollar value of the increased office productivity and professional image a computer can give you is almost impossible to figure. You know it's worth something, but you can't tell how much. For example, what's it worth to present a prospective customer with a good-looking, laser-printed estimate with matching cover letter? Nothing, if you're low bidder; plenty, if your bid is close to the other guy's, but his is on the proverbial napkin and yours is laser-printed in CSI format, with a bar graph showing the construction schedule.

Increased office productivity is another tough item to gauge. Because you can do your own payroll on a computer doesn't necessarily mean you should. Payroll services are cheap and accurate, and keep the auditor at arm's length. On the other hand, if you already have an office manager, having that person do payroll should more than pay for itself. It's a judgment call only you can make.

tasks that will improve your image and speed up office operations. As you learn more about your new tool, you'll soon be able to decide how to apply it next.

This brings up one final point: don't hesitate. Start computing now. If the pocket calculator helped your business, so will a Macintosh. If money is a problem, consider a used machine. (A Mac Plus is only about \$400, and, like a stereo, it hardly ever breaks, and when it does, you can usually fix it.) Finally, computer standardization has arrived (Apple and IBM have even announced a technology marriage), so any lessons you learn working on a Mac won't be lost to the next generation of computers.

So, builders, here we go. A Macintosh office system needs both hardware and software. I'll deal with hardware this month and save software for my next column.

The essential piece of hardware is the computer itself, also called the Central Processing Unit (CPU). Attached to it are various "peripheral" devices which handle input (keyboard and mouse), output (printer and monitor or TV screen), and data storage (floppy and hard disks). Other hardware is available — modems and fax modems, scanners and digitizers — but you'll need time to grow into them. List prices for new Macintosh computers with built-in hard drives range from under \$1,500 to over \$8,000. Each step up the price ladder improves the speed, flexibility, and sex appeal of the machine, not necessarily in that order. My advice is to buy the best you can afford.

But be forewarned: your productivity in the first six months will be about the same no matter which

machine you buy. That's because, regardless of its speed or the size or color of the screen, the learning curve is about the same. A fast machine is nice, and a large, color screen is sexy, but you still have to learn to use them.

Whatever machine you buy, have plenty of RAM (Random Access Memory) installed. RAM size is like brain size: the more RAM, the more computing power. Two megabytes is a minimum, and will let you run two or more programs at once. Five megabytes is better. CAD eats up RAM, so get lots. It's cheap at \$40 per meg. You might consider System 7, Apple's most recent upgrade to the Macintosh operating system (Mac OS). It requires at least two megs of RAM, but it can expand RAM to as much as 15 megs with a trick called "virtual memory."

Hard drive size is also measured in megabytes. Get at least 20 megs, more if you can. Like filing cabinets, you will eventually fill whatever size you have and need more.

The last piece of hardware is the printer, and, in many ways, it's the most important. I really believe that it is better to sacrifice computing power so you can afford a decent printer. Forget the dot matrix styles, except for writing checks and filling in forms with multiple copies. A laser printer is more expensive, but will give you beautiful output at a reasonable price. With a laser printer you won't have to buy any stationary. You can print almost anything —

Sample Laser Printers

Model	List Price*
Apple StyleWriter	\$599
Apple Personal Laser	\$1,200
Hewlett Packard DeskWriter	\$859

*Actual prices may vary.

invoices, statements, change orders, business cards — complete with your logo. And it's easy to change your address and phone number. If you move a lot of paper you could pay for the printer in the first year. ■

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If you have a question about computing in construction, address it to State-of-the-Art Contractor, JLC, RR#2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477.