

# Survey Results: Contractors and Computers



EARLIER SURVEYS INDICATE THAT ABOUT HALF OUR READERS USE COMPUTERS IN THEIR BUSINESSES. HERE ARE THEIR LIKES AND DISLIKES.

Contractors have some strong opinions about their computers and the ways they use them. Comments gleaned from the 448 responses to a recent JLC computer survey show builders, remodelers, and designers, as well as subcontractors, home inspectors, and architects, do their work and run their businesses more efficiently because of their computers.

Said one remodeler who uses his IBM-compatible system for estimating, job costing, accounting, word processing, and CAD: "Since we got the computer, my records are up to date and my billing gets out right away, giving me a good cash flow. Also, the computer lets me spend less time on paperwork and more time in the field doing what I do best: remodeling."

Yet there are still a lot of contractors who see their computers as enemies instead of allies. "I reluctantly came to try the computer after realizing that all of my subs and suppliers and most of their wives and kids had them. I've sort of been dragged to the screen kicking and screaming. So for now it still seems like forced piano lessons. They say I'll like it," commented one builder.

Out of the 448 survey respondents, 358 own computers while an additional 42 intend to buy a system within the next year. Only 38 had no plans to buy a computer. "My partner and I would sooner cut off our thumbs than use a computer," said one builder. Said another: "I believe my money is better spent in buying builders' tools."

Many of those who responded admit to being baffled by the range of hardware that's available. "The computer salesmen in my area have succeeded in confusing me as to which computer to buy...Perhaps you can clear the waters for me," said one remodeler. Some are concerned that their equipment will be obsolete before they get it up and running.

## Praise for the Mac

The Apple Macintosh commands a small but loyal and zealous following

among contractors. Only 79 respondents use a Mac exclusively, while another 15 use another kind of Apple. Most of the respondents (241) use IBMs or IBM clones exclusively, and 13 contractors own both a Mac and an IBM.

Despite the fact that they are in the minority, Mac users' comments are overwhelmingly positive. "I couldn't get through a week without my Mac," said one builder. "Hands-down winner for ease of use is the Mac," said another builder. "For making a presentation, Mac is best. Its graphics ability puts it above all others."

The flip side of Mac users' enthusiasm is their avowed dislike of IBM technology. Asked how many IBMs or IBM clones they owned, Mac users responded with "Yech!" or "None, never."

Many believe that Macs are easier to use than IBM-compatibles. "The Macintosh as a business computer deserves to be taken very seriously. I became more productive much quicker than any of my colleagues with IBM clones," says one remodeler. "One of the biggest assets is to have a computer that any employee can run, eliminating the need for specially trained employees," says a builder.

MacNail, MacDraw, and MacDraft are popular construction-oriented programs for Mac users. But several contractors complained that their choices are somewhat limited since most construction software is currently written for IBM clones. One remodeler plans to purchase an IBM to take advantage of the superior software that's available.

## Software Shortages

By far the most popular and perhaps simplest use that contractors have found for their systems is word processing, noted by almost 350 of the respondents. Many use it to generate proposals, marketing letters, and bids. Some have even incorporated desktop publishing systems to produce their own brochures and newsletters.

Accounting systems are used by 292

respondents, while 217 use estimating packages and 192 use job costing software. While only 139 contractors reported using CAD, several said they wouldn't hesitate to incorporate it if they could only find an affordable package.

While users of IBMs or IBM clones have more software at their disposal, many are having a hard time finding packages to meet all of their needs. Several expressed a desire for more integrated software that would make data entry easier. Says one electrical subcontractor: "We waste so much time with separate entry for each task!"

Mac and IBM users alike complain that construction-related software is pricey and hard to get hold of. "I am not in the market for \$1,500 programs — the cash isn't there...Also, my mind is in too many other places to learn difficult, overpriced software programs," said one builder. Another complained that it's nearly impossible to get construction software on a trial basis from the local computer store.

Two contractors reported writing their own software to handle their special needs. "Setting up your own system is easier than trying to use some generic estimating or accounting software. That way you can design it to your own needs," said one. Another wrote a program for an IBM clone that figures square footage "wall by wall" and multiplies it by labor, materials, and time to develop a price.

## Computers as Tools

Regardless of what hardware or software they are using, dozens of contractors said their computers have saved them hours of work and, in the process, plenty of money. "The computer has aided tremendously in increasing my professionalism. The computer probably saves me enough time that I could handle an additional \$150,000 to \$200,000 of business gross," said one remodeler. Another remodeler agreed: "Thanks for your recognition that a computer is a necessary tool in construction, just like a hammer." ■