Relevant Information about your Computer System

There is a story that may help to put a few thoughts into perspective in a somewhat humorous fashion.

A hot-air balloonist while on one of his trips identified that he was lost, so he yelled to a man on the ground: “Excuse me! Where am I?

“You’re in a balloon,” replied the man on the ground.
“You must work in information technology” the balloonist said.
“Yes,” replied the man. “How did you know?”
“Because what you’ve just told me is technically correct, but of no use to anyone.”
“You must be a business manager,” the man on the ground called back.
“I am,” replied the balloonist. “But how did you know?”
“You don’t know where you are, or where you’re going,” answered the man on the ground. “But you expect me to be able to help. You’re in the same position you were in before we met, but now somehow it’s my fault.”

So we at CIP would like to be more practical than the balloonist, and we want to work with businesses with more accountability than the man on the ground.

It’s always been our belief that more informed clients are better clients. We’d like to help our prospective clients develop appropriate expectations as to the nature and scope of what to expect from a company like ours, so we’d like to talk about a few things in our industry.

The three most significant hurdles that we are faced with in any client situation can be summed up as follows:

- ✓ How small is small?
- ✓ What are the real costs of a computer system?
- ✓ Open data bases and reliability of the total system.

The Small to Medium Sized Enterprise (SME) Myth

We hear so much reference from businesses that service other businesses that their target market is the small to medium sized enterprise. What exactly is an SME. A very common definition of a small business is one that employs fewer than fifty people. Because our ultimate focus on computing power relates to the application it’s used for, we’ll talk about our specialty . . . accounting software.

Much is said about particular applications being developed for the small business market, and technically, that’s correct. But that market could include companies with up to fifty employees. And we know that businesses employing fifty people have substantially different needs and budgets to meet those needs than businesses employing twenty or less people. For that matter businesses with fewer than five employees present different challenges again.

We’re focusing our marketing efforts to attract businesses who have less than ten users working on a computer system that was acquired primarily to operate an accounting and information system. We’ll refer to them as micro businesses

Why is that important? Because many applications that say they are developed for the small business are developed for businesses that are a whole lot bigger than most that we encounter. So the processes are different. When you're dealing with micro businesses, a business advisor has to get from A to B a lot quicker, than one would if working with a fifty-employee company. And micro businesses normally have a great deal of difficulty creating sufficient value to justify software maintenance fees upwards of $3,000 annually.

By the same token, in micro businesses it's quite often true that in order to be cost effective many standard business practices that work in larger organizations need to be altered with a view to compressing the process.

In the micro business market everything must be fast tracked . . the needs analysis, the evaluation process, the implementation, and the training all need to be completed more quickly than most of the SME service providers envision.

Pricing Hardware and Services

Pricing is a delicate issue in any business strategy. The pricing has to be strong enough to create sufficient profit to enable the provider to exist, and it needs to be low enough to be competitive. But there's more to pricing than just the ticket price of the hardware or the hourly rate of the service. Usually the most significant costs of technology issues are the costs of downtime when the system crashes, or the cost of lost opportunities and mistakes. The lost opportunities may be measured in many ways . . . . lost sales, cost overruns because the reports weren't available on time, frustrations created by trying to implement the wrong software, and recurring downtime as a result of not getting the problem fixed the first time are examples that come to mind.

We price hardware that quite frankly is configured to be more dependable. Electronic components are usually evaluated by failure rate, and ***therefore no one can ever say that a machine will not fail***. What we can and do say is that our experience has taught us that the risk of failure is substantially lower, and if it does fail we'll replace the faulty part.

Since most failures because of faulty components happen early in the life of a computer and that means two things to our clients. The parts will be replaced under warranty and they will incur a minimum of downtime and frustration as a result of faulty components in new hardware.

Dell has captured significant market share over the past few years, and the conventional wisdom is that if you're not sure what brand to purchase, by a Dell. With much the same reputation that IBM and Hewlett Packard once had, it's been suggested that nobody has ever been fired for buying Dell. The catch is that when you acquire a "bundled" computer from one of the mass retailers, you're not always sure that you have just exactly the components and configuration that you need. If you custom configure a machine from a mass retailer, you'll probably find that pricing is quite different than the advertised specials. We're so confident in our pricing that we will provide you with a price of an equally equipped unit with every computer quote we deliver!

Moreover our computers are specifically configured to be easily upgradeable.

So the key costs to control in a computer system are not necessarily those of the initial hardware purchase. While you can't afford to ignore hardware component costs outright, other costs that must be

factored into your computer system decisions would include:

- ✓ Implementation costs of the new system
- ✓ Cost of converting your existing data to the new software
- ✓ Cost of follow up visits to correct oversights from previous visits
- ✓ Training costs associated with new software
- ✓ Opportunity cost of downtime resulting from inefficient transition processes

Open Data Bases and System Reliability

When we started into this business, the computers we worked with ran on DOS (Disk Operating System), and for the most part installing a program was as complex as inserting the first disk of the series into a floppy drive, typing a:install, and pressing the enter key. . . . . pretty simple.

Over the past ten years, Microsoft has done a wonderful job of converting all their systems to a "Windows" platform, and in the process continued to stress the concept that newer was better.

In essence, Microsoft is fundamentally correct.

In the DOS world, moving data from one application to another was often cumbersome and static. For example; in order to do financial analysis in a spreadsheet, one had to either export the data, or re-enter the information into spreadsheet format. While this process was considerably faster than completing the tasks manually, it resulted in virtually all the analysis data being static.

There were similar issues with integration with word processing and data base applications, and custom applications quite often required substantial duplication of key information in systems. For example, if businesses ran third party software to work a point of sale system, it was quite often necessary to maintain the customer data in two different formats.

As the software industry has matured and applications have become more user focused, we've seen a trend towards what is known as an 'open database'. This means that although the data may have been created by one program, it can be read, manipulated and reported on by many others. Specifically, users wanted the power and flexibility to create data in a specific application and then analyze or manipulate that programs data in another more common application such as Microsoft Excel or Access.

The accounting software industry has followed suit in this respect and most accounting applications on the market today utilize 'open database' technology – either through a native connection to the data or utilizing ODBC, or Open DataBase Connectivity. What this means to the user is that financial information can be read directly from the accounting application in Access, Excel or Crystal Reports. Many accounting applications also utilize report writing programs like Crystal Reports to handle the on-screen and printed output from the program.

This adds extra flexibility to the user and allows for 3rd party developers to create custom applications for accounting software using conventional programming and database tools more easily.

This flexibility is not without a cost, however.

Many accounting software applications require specialized skills to be installed and configured properly to ensure that the accounting application (the front end) is communicating properly with the database

(the back end). For some applications, this is a seamless or 'blind' installation where the end user isn't aware that this component is being installed, but it can still have implications on performance and conflicts with other applications running on the workstation.

So if you end up with error messages while performing your accounting tasks, it doesn't necessarily mean that the accounting program is not working. It may mean that one of the "background" programs needs some attention.

Your point of view however is that you don't care! It's not working and you should get it fixed.

We're happy to do that because we have the necessary skills to deal with the configuration of all of the software involved.

When you are selecting a business partner to work with on your computer system, you'll need to ensure that the business partner is bringing sufficient skills in all of the software (including the background applications) to deal with all of your issues.

Why you should work with Computer Installations Plus

We are designed specifically

- ✓ *To work for your style and size of company.*
- ✓ *To value your time and understand how important it is for your information system to be functioning at full capacity.*
- ✓ *Differentiate between the bleeding edge and leading edge of technology*
- ✓ *To err on the side of dependability.*
- ✓ *To be a one-stop service provider for your accounting software, related information, reporting, hardware and networking needs.*