

How to “Use the Other 90%” of Your Computer’s Capabilities

by Mike Foster

Are you using your computer to its fullest capabilities? If you’re like the majority of Americans, the answer is no. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 92.2 million adults routinely use a computer. Of that number, 63.9 million people use a computer at work, and 37.4 million use one at home. And regardless of whether it’s home or business use, the number one computer function is word processing.

However, today’s computers are designed for much more than merely word processing functions. In fact, when you stretch your computer capabilities beyond word processing, you open yourself up to a whole new way of running your business and your personal affairs.

Unfortunately, most people were never taught about other computer functions or they’re too afraid to experiment. As a result, they waste both time and resources by manually doing things that can easily be computerized. For example, it’s common practice for office workers to print a document, walk over to the fax machine, and then manually fax their recipient. However, most computers have faxing capabilities, which virtually eliminates the need to print a document to be faxed. By faxing from your computer, you’re saving both the cost of paper and the cost associated with wasted time. On top of that, your fax is often of much higher quality on the receiving end.

Training is the Key

No matter why you haven’t ventured past your word processing functions, there are simple ways to learn about the additional functionality your computer offers. Computer training seminars, books, and magazines offer a wealth of information designed to get you up to computer speed. There are also college computer classes and classes offered by your local vocational training center. Before you register for a course, be sure to request information about the course instructor. You want to be assured that you’re learning from someone who stays abreast of technology information and who can communicate effectively.

When choosing the type of training to pursue, look at the benefits the course can offer you. Will it teach you how to work a specific program? Is the course designed to help you increase productivity? Is there a prerequisite for the computer class? Does your current computer have the required memory or speed to run the application you’ll be learning? Know what you’re getting into before attending the class, seminar, or workshop.

For those who decide to teach themselves via magazine articles and books, skim through various materials to get a feel for the kind of magazines and books available. Just as not everyone likes to drive the

same kind of car, not everyone will effectively learn from the same kind of written material. If you don’t understand everything you read initially, don’t worry. As you continue gathering knowledge, the computer terms will start to become familiar, and you’ll soon be proficient in whatever computer topic you’re researching.



The Other 90%

So is there really life beyond word processing? You bet! In fact, when you add things like Contact Management, Spreadsheets, Databases, Desktop Publishing, and “out of the ordinary” Internet capabilities to your computer repertoire, you add a whole new level of productivity to your day.

Contact Management

Like the name implies, contact management software helps you manage the contacts you make with customers. However, instead of simply storing names, addresses, and phone numbers, it also keeps track of a complete list of pending activities with each customer and keeps a history of completed activities. Do you ever run across a misplaced note saying you were supposed to meet someone, and the date has already past? When you use contact management software effectively, you eliminate the need for handwritten notes piled all over your desk and taped to your computer screen. The contact management software documents each communication with your customers so all your information regarding a project or account is just a click away. And if your contact

management software is network enabled, other employees can view the stored information about each client. This eliminates the need to continually brief co-workers about a specific account. Anyone in the office can access the information and help the customer without disturbing you for background or status information.

Spreadsheets

The next time you are about to use pencil and paper to create a chart of calculations, stop. Instead, turn to your computer's spreadsheet capabilities to make the process easier. With a spreadsheet, you can organize your material according to the sort methods you choose, whether alphabetically, by date, or any other criteria. A spreadsheet will also automatically calculate totals for you and enable you to view your calculations in a graph format. This is especially useful for business presentations, when you need to show others how money is being spent or how sales are increasing. Whether you need to keep track of accounting information, production, or even your golf scores, a spreadsheet saves time and eliminates human error.

Databases

A database allows you an easy way to track lists of items. This could include customer contact information, charts of accounts, employee profiles, inventory records, etc. Rather than keeping this information in handwritten form in a notebook or legal pad, a database allows you to organize, sort, search your information by specific criteria, and enables you to make quick changes whenever necessary. And when you need specific files in hard copy, a database allows you to "filter" and print only the specific records you need. Database information can also be imported into other applications, such as word processing software, in order to create form letters or envelope addresses.

Desktop Publishing

Have you ever spent a large amount of money to get a brochure designed and printed in bulk quantity, only to want to change it a few weeks later, before you've eliminated your current supply? If you have desktop publishing software, you can eliminate this dilemma. Desktop publishing software allows you to create everything from brochures, booklets, and sales flyers to letterhead, mailing labels, and business cards. And when you invest in a good quality color printer, you can choose to print out the exact quantity you need, thus eliminating waste. Most desktop publishing software programs are fairly simple to learn. Additionally, they're often the topic of computer training seminars, so if you have questions,

finding the answers will be easy. Depending on the number of items you need printed, you may still wish to employ the services of a professional printer. If so, you can design the items yourself and then supply the printer with an electronic form of your work on disk or via e-mail. This one step could potentially save you thousands of dollars in design fees, while allowing you complete control of your printed message.

Internet

Connect your computer to the Internet and you open yourself up to a whole new world of information and services. If you aren't doing it yet, take advantage of other services available that allow you to retrieve your faxes and voice mail while you are away from the office, find new clients, research information about companies, read the latest news, book your own travel, get driving directions, consult an expert, and conduct electronic banking, just to name a few. But be careful, because with all the information available, it's easy to lose track of time online, or even worse, become addicted to the Internet in general. However, if you use the Internet responsibly, you can make new contacts, build your business, and increase your overall productivity.



The list of "other" computer functions is virtually limitless. The above ideas and suggestions will get you on track for using your computer more effectively. When you learn more computer capabilities and implement them into your daily routine, you become more productive in your job and more efficient with your time. The result is more job satisfaction for you, and higher profits for your organization.

About the Author:

Mike Foster is a frequent presenter of keynote speeches, seminars, and workshops. His message about how to use technology to increase profits and productivity is welcomed by small business owners and Fortune 10 executives alike. He has a 20-year background in computer technology including 12 years owning his own technology firm. For more information about Foster's programs, call 800-657-7107 or visit www.fosterinstitute.com.