TECHNOLOGY CORNER

Selecting The Right Computer For Your Business

There's no time like the present to consider automating your business or upgrading your computer system. According to the North Carolina Association of CPAs, the right computer is an investment in your company's growth and overall success. Not only can computers help you run your business more efficiently, but they can also expand your financial management capabilities.

But installing the right computer isn't just a matter of going out and purchasing the latest model. The process of converting your existing records and processes to a computer system can be lengthy and difficult.

Review Your Needs

Before you visit your local computer store, ask yourself the following questions: Do I really need a computer? What do I hope it will accomplish? Will it be cost-effective to install a new system? What hardware and software will I need? Does the software I need already exist or will it have to be developed? How much will it cost to do the entire conversion and how long will that process take? How will I train my employees to operate the new system?

Evaluate Your Current System

Whether you are converting from a manual system, or upgrading your existing system, you should begin by evaluating your current operations and identifying problems. For example, late and inaccurate monthly financial statements, or slow turnover of accounts receivable may indicate that it is time for a new or better system.

Next, evaluate your current business procedures to determine which type of system will best satisfy your needs. For example, you may require a system to help reduce labor costs associated with high clerical involvement. Or you may need a system to help eliminate repetitious or numerous time-consuming tasks. Another reason to buy or upgrade a system is if your business requires mathematically complex calculations, highly accurate recordkeeping, and timely preparation of reports.

A properly designed system can help you perform many of the critical business functions of your company, such as speeding the preparation of financial statements and reducing the potential for clerical and computational errors in accounting and other administrative functions.
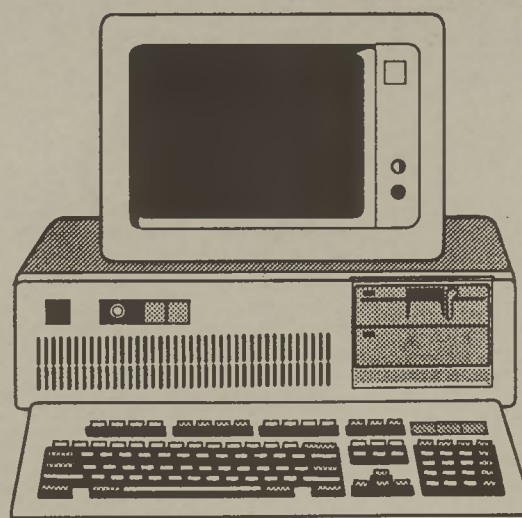
Selecting Software

Computer software is the term given to the application programs that enable your to run specific tasks, such as word processing or spreadsheets, on the computer. Software comes in several varieties: general purpose, custom-written, or industry-specific. the number of programs available today makes selection difficult. But asking certain key questions can help you make the right choice. for instance, how easy is the software to use? Are qualified installers nearby? What is the quality of the documentation? What is the reputation of the vendor for providing good support?

Selecting Hardware

Hardware includes the computer itself, storage devices, terminals and printers. The hardware you select must be fully capable of accepting data, processing it, and generating output within a reasonable time.

When you are ready to select computer hardware, consider the following factors: present and projected volume of data to be processed; the amount of technical and service support you will receive from the manufacturer; the ease with which you can operate the equipment; the ability to expand or upgrade the equipment; and the reliability of the hardware, the vendor and the manufacturer. You should also take into account environmental considerations such as heat, noise and electrical requirements.

After you review your current procedures and determine your software and hardware needs, develop a plan for implementing the system. Pay special attention to selecting computer operators and to setting up a training program. Other factors to keep in mind include preparing your current operation for conversion to the system and monitoring the system once it is up and running.

If you don't have the time or expertise to automate your company, you may want to ask your CPA for assistance. CPAs can help you determine your automation objectives and make recommendations on how to select and install computer systems.

For further advice on selecting a computer, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to: NCACPA, PO Box 80188, Raleigh, NC 27623, and request a copy of the brochure, "Connecting Your Business with the Right Computer System".