© 1994 National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, Inc. Reproduction prohibited without written permission.

OF TICKS AND TOCKS, BITS AND BYTES

by Daniel J. Stein (IN)

Early in 1992 I was approached by two directors of our local chapter who are very involved in the Mid-America Regional. They wanted to know if a computer could assist them with the more tedious facets of registration, table allocation, badge printing, and rosters. I was approached because when I'm not collecting or repairing watches, I'm in charge of computer support at a large law firm in Indianapolis.

After hearing their needs, I told them that there was a strong possibility of a successful automation solution for an investment of under $2,000. I also informed them that if they needed any assistance that I would help bring the project to completion. This sort of offer can be dangerous in the busy volunteer world. I was later appointed finance chairman and elected my chapter's treasurer and secretary. (*Editors Note: Mr. Stein is the Secretary and treasurer for Indiana Chapter #18.*)

The first step was to steal a few good ideas from other chapters who have done similar automation projects. Representatives from the two chapters sponsoring Mid-America jumped in a van and traveled to the home of Lehr Dircks, registration chairman of the Southern Ohio Regional. On an old personal computer and database (discussed and defined later), he showed us how he organized the registrants' information and sent them a confirmation letter with a computer generated mailing label. His approach was excellent and we all agreed that newer software and hardware (also discussed and defined later) could make this job easier.

Whether it's watch repair or computer automation, the first step in any project is to determine the proper tools necessary to complete a well-defined task. In this case, computer hardware and software selection is necessary. Let me first define a few terms to clear up any possible misunderstandings, and then I'll inform you as to how we filled each need.

In the computer world, hardware is defined as anything you can touch. Examples of hardware are the monitor (the TV-like screen that lets one view computing results), the printer (the typewriter devise that allows one to print the computing results), and the central processing unit (called the CPU, which is the box that houses the hard drive, floppy drive, memory, modem, and processing chips). In horological terms, the monitor is analogous to the face, and the CPU is the movement.

If hardware is something you can touch, then software cannot be touched. I don't mean to imply that it's too small or too hard to reach. Rather software is a set of instructions to tell the hardware what task to perform at what time. Once again in horological terms, software is the motion created by a minute repeater.

Selecting the proper hardware and software is a difficult proposition in this time of rapid change in the computer industry. There are two major types of personal computers—Apple and IBM. Apple computers are used widely in schools, graphic departments, and progressive businesses. The advantage of an Apple computer, particularly their Macintosh line, is the use of icons. An icon is a picture representation of the task one wishes to complete. There is little need to know computer commands, just point with a mouse (a hand held devise that moves an arrow on the monitor's screen) and click.

IBM and IBM compatible computers are catching on to this user friendly icon method. Used primarily by business, IBM computers are the standard. In the IBM world, Windows is the software that is a controller of other software programs. One can use an IBM computer without Windows but almost all home computer packages come with Windows installed. In Windows as with Apple computers, one points to icons to access other computer functions. The beauty of Windows is the ability to run more than one program at the same time.

I suggested to the computer committee that we purchase an IBM compatible computer. The decision between IBM and Apple was simple for me, I'm very familiar with IBM's and know very little about Apples. We chose an IBM compatible computer. The computer came with some software installed. This software included Windows, LotusWorks, and telecommunications applications.

I hesitate to make any recommendations. As I mentioned previously, the market is changing so fast and prices are falling so precipitously that by the time of publication my recommendation would be obsolete. Let me instead say that any IBM compatible 486 computer should be sufficient for a chapter's automation needs. Discuss the features and price with a salesperson to determine a proper balance. The chapter should expect to spend about $1,600 for a good CPU and monitor.

One hardware component I underestimated was the printer. We purchased a 24-pin dot matrix printer. While a printer of this type should be sufficient, the printer we purchased was overly complex and paper jams were frequent. For under $500 a chapter can purchase an ink-jet printer that creates crisp images without the hassles of tractor-fed forms.

There is no reason to purchase more than the base model color monitor. If the intent is to consider desktop publishing or running complex computer games, then an upgrade may be desirable.

Other hardware that must be purchased includes a surge protecting power strip, a mouse, printer cable, floppy disks, and a box of paper.

© 1994 National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, Inc. Reproduction prohibited without written permission.

Software is a tricky area. The collection of information for a regional does not require the use of high cost or powerful software. In fact, if one is wise, he or she should look at a "works" programs. There are various works programs. LotusWorks, Microsoft Works, and WordPerfect Works are the best known and used. One word of caution—avoid LotusWorks on Packard Bell Machines. It is not the same as LotusWorks from Lotus. These works programs cost under $150 and can perform many functions. These functions include a database (an automated file cabinet), a spreadsheet (an automated adding machine) and a word processor (an automated typewriter). The function most used for a regional is the database. It takes information and organizes it into logical categories. In computer terms these categories are called fields. Each field represents a significant fact about a registrant.

The beauty of a database is its ability to sort and organize data faster and better than a manual system. For instance, we could sort by day the registration was received, or by the registrant's last name. The database can also generate reports that print all or some of the data in various formats. Thus the creation and printing of table rosters by table number or alphabetically by tableholder's last name took just minutes.

In our case, the officers decided that they wanted to capture 17 separate pieces of information. These fields were:

> Last Name, First Name, NAWCC Number, Name to print on the badge, Address, City, State, Zip, Number of Admissions Purchased, Number of Banquets Purchased, Number of Children Admissions, Table Type Purchased, Table Number Assigned, Date Registration was Received, Dollars Received, Extra Badge Names, and Comments.

I created a database using these fields. The most difficult part of this process is the time consuming data entry. The registration chairman decided to enter the data as he received the registration forms. I think this is the best way for two reasons. First, if there is a problem, it will be detected early and corrections can be made before a catastrophe occurs. Second, I believe it kept him practicing database functions.

I also created a form that served as a confirmation letter that inserted all of the relevant registration information as well as hotel and regional information. Unfortunately, the complications with the printer caused us to forgo this feature this year.

Now that the information of all registrants is in the database, updating it for next year will be very easy. The registration chairman will search for the registrant's name and update only the date received and new table number, if any.

After the data has been entered onto the database, backups are crucial. A backup is a way the computer copies its files onto floppy disks. The copies become extremely valuable if information is lost due to computer or operator error. Backups should be made after every entry session.

We needed one additional piece of software. This software allowed us to print our own name tags for admission to the mart. We found an excellent package called Labels Unlimited for $70. It allowed us to make custom badges that identified the registrant. It printed the person's nickname in large bold print, first and last name, city, and state. Table holders had a special mark printed on their tags to allow them access to the mart to set up their tables. We also purchased card stock and holders from the same company for $23 per 100. This is another place where a good printer is great and a bad printer is virtually worthless.

I have found other uses for the computer since the regional. I am the treasurer/secretary of Chapter #18. This lofty title means that I am responsible for keeping the membership list current, keeping the books up to date, producing mailing labels for our local bulletin, and producing a chapter roster handbook. This is all done much faster than a handwritten file with the assistance of computer automation. I created a database that tracks the members of the chapter and has fields that are as follows:

> Last Name, First Name, Spouse's Name, Street, City, State, Zip, Phone, NAWCC Number, First Year of Membership, Last Year of Membership, Comments, Date Membership Card was Sent.

The spreadsheet portion of LotusWorks allows me to keep track of receipts and disbursements for my treasurer's report given at each meeting. The word processing feature allows me to write letters to existing and prospective members about chapter meetings and membership.

Calculating the benefit of automation is a difficult task, particularly when the efforts are performed by volunteers and there is no labor cost savings. I believe that computer use reduces frustration cost of valuable volunteers and should be considered by any chapter.