The $100,000,000 Piece of REQUIRED! Software

Within the last few years, businesses have virtually been *given* one of the greatest productivity tools in history. The wheel, steam engines and now the latest (The $100,000,000 Piece of REQUIRED! Software) in the information age. Each era has its great inventions and tools, tailored to the needs of that age, allowing great "leaps" in efficiencies for those who can afford and take advantage of them *before* they (or their companies) become outmoded though competitive inefficiencies.

Even until relatively recently small businesses had small computers and small software systems, medium-sized companies had medium-size computers and software systems and large companies had large, very-costly, computers and software systems (supported by a large IT staff).

Large and medium-size companies had advantages over small companies because of these greater and more superior resources. But that has changed in the last few years – all companies can now afford The $100,000,000 piece of software and unless they "embrace" it their company they will be at a major disadvantage *very* quickly. Likewise, employees not learning how to use this tool are rapidly marginalizing themselves.

Excel has become the universal language of business.

Excel is the easiest means of "translating" between varying computers and computer software systems. Not using Excel is like being deaf – you cannot hear any voice but your own.

Obstacles to Integrating Excel

Most large and small businesses have embraced Excel – certainly those that are progressive and seeking to be more efficient. What are the major stumbling-blocks to Excel?

- *Large business snobbery* – "We have a mainframe system and programmers that can do everything – using an `off-the-shelf' cheap piece of software is hokey." These people have no idea of the power and versatility of Excel nor the disadvantage they are causing their business and the utter non-employability of themselves when they go to look for another job! They have become dinosaurs (a process that takes very little time now!).
- *Small business intimidation* – Some people, in small businesses, are always intimidated by large businesses, resisting Excel for the same reason; they want to be like large businesses, having a mainframe system do everything for them. But just as progressive large businesses employees have learned there is much that can be done far more simply by Excel, those in small businesses developing professionally, know the same is true for small businesses – Excel has great use for many applications!
- Resistance to learning yet another software system – This is a legitimate concern. There is seemingly no limit to what we are expected to know – how the mainframe systems works, *Word*, etc. Is Excel REALLY necessary? The answer is yes. And surprisingly, it is easy to learn when . . .

Using Excel Wisely

Any decent mainframe (including PC) software system will do just about anything Excel can do and Excel CAN (although sometimes clumsily) accomplish what a mainframe system can do – but simply because they can do what the other does, does not mean they are redundant. The key is to use the two in a union of efficiency.

The following chart highlights the key advantages of mainframe systems compared to Excel:

Mainframe System	Excel
Developing "raw" data	Manipulating data
Populating fields	Sorting, totaling and report prep.

Mainframe systems (for example Accounts Receivable systems) have cross-linking tables and internal commands that accomplish much of their work – customer name tables that link to customer numbers, etc. If (to continue our A/R example) you want to create a data table listing all invoices for the month with the associated customer names, numbers, items sold, selling price, freight charges, etc. the mainframe system is best for doing this and (since it contains the underlying data) must be used as the source for the data. BUT, once you have this data, to "slice and dice," (sort, subtotal – the foundation for most computer reports) Excel will beat the mainframe system 99 times out of a 100.

If you have used a report (developed in Excel) long enough to know it is a recurring report you need daily, weekly or monthly for a LONG time, it may be worth the time and cost to develop a mainframe program. This is assuming, however, you do not expect to change the report in any major way or with any frequency; for the infrequent or yet to be fully established reports Excel is the way to go.

As mentioned above, Excel is surprisingly easy to learn when we learn the keys to successfully using it efficiently:

- All mainframe systems (especially the inexpensive off-the shelf systems developed for small and mid-size businesses) let you export existing reports to Excel and have report writers that let you select and export data fields to Excel. When you learn how to do this, you simply have to learn how to manipulate data within Excel – its easiest feature. Learning Excel is secondary to learning what Excel can do in conjunction with your mainframe system. Since most uses of Excel involve using existing (rather than creating) data exported from a mainframe system, you should initially concentrate on the easiest to use Excel functions of sorting and subtotaling – not the "exotic" million and one other features you may never need or use.
- Learn Keystrokes! If you "Google" *Excel keystrokes* you will find many sites listing the primary keystrokes that allow you to work more rapidly. Look at several of these, copy them if the site has this option, and learn the keystrokes, one at a time, for the functions you use most often. Within a relatively short period of time you will increase you Excel efficiency dramatically.
- Use control numbers to ensure, in manipulating data, the end-result is correct. One tremendous advantage Excel has over a mainframe system is that in mainframe developed software systems the users seldom have control over the reliability of the data – they have to just "assume" it is correct. BEFORE you slice and dice (sort and subtotal) with Excel develop certain key controls numbers so you can ensure the manipulated data is correct – know the number of lines of data you are working with, the total sales for the month, or any other key amount that will give you confidence your end product is correct! (See The One "Magic" (and Crucial) Question for more on this).

The wheel, steam engines and now the latest, Excel; it is the $100,000,000 Piece of REQUIRED Software that businesses and individuals must learn to stay competitive! And like any new technology which is initially intimidating, who would return to the mule and plow instead of a tractor?