Supers, managers speeding along the information highway

By J. BARRY MOTHES

So, exactly where are you on the information fairway? Dead center, 250 yards out and rolling along? Or stuck behind in the rough, lost and possibly out of play?

The use of computers by golf course superintendents for everything from irrigation systems and inventory to letters to greens committees is steadily on the rise. And several significant developments on the horizon have increased the chances for a stark and potentially crippling gap between those who use them and are comfortable with it, and those who don't, and aren't.

A 1995 survey by the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) revealed that about 75 percent of its members now have computers in their offices, according to David Bishop, a technical information services manager for the GCSAA. The vast majority of those with computers had upper-end models with the windows environment.

Of the 365 superintendents who responded to the survey, the most extensive on computer use ever done by the association:

• 90 percent use computers for word processing.

• 60 percent use them for irrigation-related software.

• 50 percent use them for data-base management and record-keeping.

• 10 percent use them for education-related software.

"The percentages were not particularly surprising that many superintendents out there have access," Bishop said. "But we were surprised at the level of technology and the size of computers they have. Most are upper-end models. The level of technology out there is a little higher than we thought."

That's encouraging and relevant news to Bishop. He's working on developing a World Wide Web site for the GCSAA that will be available to GCSAA-member superintendents. A demonstration of an "on-line" prototype was on display at the International Golf Course Conference and Show in Orlando in February. Bishop said the GCSAA hopes to have an operational web site up and running by this summer.

Meanwhile, as Golf Course News reported last month, the U.S. Golf
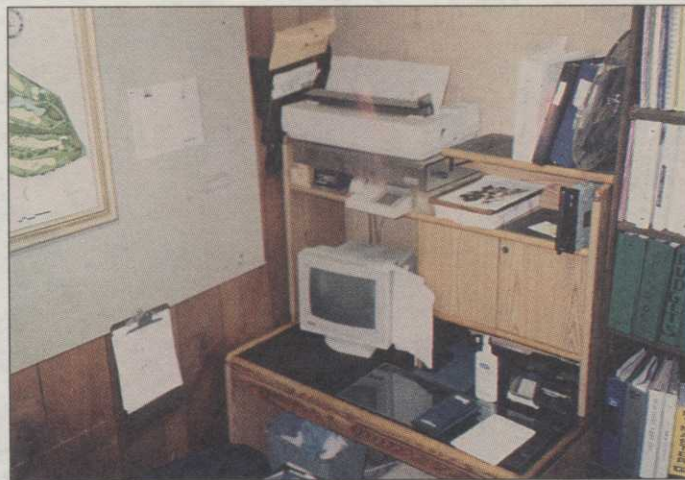
David Mahoney has used several innovations to fit all his needs into this small office.

Updating your office with just two outlets and a phone line

By DAVID W. MAHONEY

Technology is great! Computers, faxes, printers, copiers, scanners, modems and slick answering devices are aiding and speeding communication. Fax me this, get a message, surf the Net and prepare a document for your next green committee meeting. All from your office. Sounds great! Go out, buy the equipment and good luck having it fit your office. Technology has overwhelmed the average superintendent's office.

While we're all waiting for the new maintenance facility and updated office, secretary-equipped, it's still nice to take advantage of today's wonders to improve our output, content and efficiency. Having a small cubicle to work from,
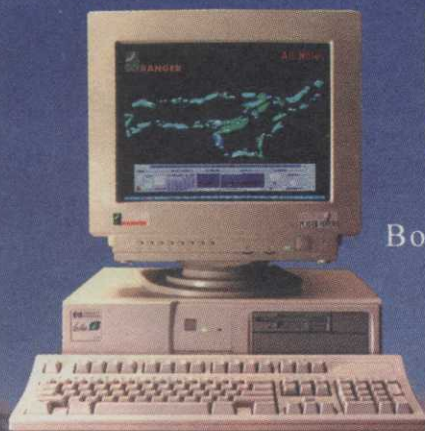
here are some tips on how I've made the most of what I have to take advantage of what's out there.

• Computer: My recommendation for anyone buying a computer is: Buy the version that was yesterday's best, a month ago. Technology changes so quickly, if you purchased the best available computer — let's say Pentium 90 with 16 MB of Ram memory — you'd pay $4,500. However, if you purchased just a wee bit less Pentium 75 with 8 MB Ram with expansion capabilities, you'd pay $2,400. Buy the almost-best. Don't sell yourself short on what you need. The computer game is a steeple chase: The hardware has more disc space, memory and speed; yet the software developers are right behind, filling up your new machine to the max. The greatest misstatement on this subject comes from Bill Gates himself, who said, "Ten MB of hard drive is more than anyone will ever need."
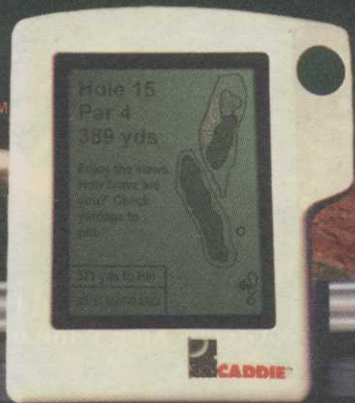
A graduate of the Penn State Turfgass Program, David W. Mahoney has been property manager at Siwanoy Country Club in Bronxville, N.Y., since 1988.

In the market? Check needs vs. availability

By MARK LESLIE

One computer software system streamlines maintenance activities. Another fine-tunes the irrigation system. A third ensures the pump station operates at maximum efficiency. A fourth, equipment-oriented, is geared to mechanics. Yet another is a monitor hooked up to weather satellites, allowing the superintendent to get an up-to-the-moment look at weather conditions — anywhere in the country.

"We're on the brink of maybe becoming too technological," said certified golf course superintendent Kevin Ross of Country Club of the Rockies in Edwards, Colo. "It's a huge investment in time just to find out what software to buy. Maintenance is definitely more efficient today, but you barely scratch the surface of the potential of all the software programs."

Yet the area "barely scratched" touches all parts of the golf course operation — both maintenance and management.

At Country Club of the Rockies, for instance, Ross has five computers. Ross has one, his assistants another and his mechanic one. Another is dedicated to the irrigation system and an old model is destined for the common cafeteria, for the crew and handicap software. He also has a weather center and intends to add a pump station computer.

SEE PRODUCT SHOWPLACE
PAGES 40-42

"If 20 or 30 years ago somebody had said you're going to program your irrigation system with a computer in the office, people would have thought they were on drugs," Ross said. "Not only are we doing that, we're programming with hand-held radios. It's very difficult to keep up with the technology and do a dynamite job."

For superintendents in the market for software programs, Ross suggested:

1) Called all the companies and get demonstration discs.

2) Have the superintendent, assistants and mechanic run through those discs.

3) Do not compare any notes until everyone has looked at them. Then compare what each person liked and did not like about each program, deciding what best fits the course's needs.

4) Make sure technical support, which is crucial, is comprehensive. Most of the programs are windows-oriented, making them easy to use.

Is the decision to buy any of these software programs an easy one to make?

"The weather station is a no-brainer," Ross said. Otherwise, no.

But each golf course's needs are different, he said, so superintendents should decide what personally is best for them, not their colleague's.

Info highway

Continued from previous page

Association (USGA) has joined the world of the Internet and Michigan State University's Turfgrass Information Foundation (TGIF) is on the verge of doing the same.

A GCSAA web site could provide a nearly instant and endless supply of information and advice for superintendents on everything from state and federal regulatory issues to academic research on turfgrass.

Web sites and on-line technology. It's all a long way from what Jon Scott and a few other curious and adventurous golf course superintendents were doing back in the mid-1980s with their Apple II desktops and primitive software programs like Visicalc.

Scott, a superintendent for 16 years at Grand Traverse Resort in Michigan and Valhalla in Louisville, Ky., has been working for Jack Nicklaus' Golden Bear International Golf for seven years. He is currently a consulting agronomist.

"As it is in the business world," said Scott, "a computer is a necessity in managing any small or large operation. The cost and simplicity of the programs are such that there is no reason for the smallest golf course not to have a laptop or personal computer on the desk."

Scott was one of a small group of computer-literate superintendents in the mid-1980s that started Turf Byte, a superintendents computer bulletin board that is run out of Kansas City, Mo. That was before pre-packaged integrated software programs came along like TRIMS, which handle budgeting, inventory, work-order production, chemical and fertilizer record-keeping, soil-testing data, and just about anything else important to a superintendent's day-to-day operations. TRIMS is now one of several software programs available for golf course management and maintenance.

Another computer-related tool gaining use with cutting-edge superintendents are satellite weather systems, where a computer-like monitor and a point-and-click system that can be installed in the superintendent's office offers instant access to weather information.

"And now, of course, there's the Internet," said Scott. "The resources that are there are just the beginning. Every major research center or university is going to have a data base that you will be able to go in and download articles and agronomy pages."

Scott said the brave new world of the computer-clicking golf course superintendent could create prob-

lems for some.

"It's going leave some people behind," he said. "It already has. I don't know how we get around this. It happens in other industries with the technology today. The small-timers at places where their clubs can't afford to go to the seminars and conferences ... they're going to have to find a way to learn on their own, or they're going to get left behind in their careers.

"It's not a measure of how good a turf manager they are. It's a measure of how good an administrator they are."

GCS provides new 'window' on grounds maintenance

BATON ROUGE, La. — Calling its GCS for Windows "the ultimate grounds care system," InCircuit Development Corp. has entered the world of "windows" in a big way in the golf industry.

GCS integrates several management sections including chemical/fertilizer, personnel, financial, weather/irrigation, inventory, calendar, math, vegetation library, references and work orders. Help buttons appear on every major screen.

Users can scan in photos of employees, inventory items and vegetation, while printed reports, complete with graphing and analysis, are customized with the course's logo.

A calendar program allows scheduling of important events for the staff which can be reviewed by day, month or year. The math element simplifies calculation of common areas and volumes.

Every conversion reference imaginable is included in the reference section, which also carries a full-color reference for pH and particle size charts.

More information is available by contacting InCircuit Development Corp., P.O. Box 80771, Baton Rouge, La. 70898; 800-963-1925.

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