

Computers and E-Maintenance: Fad, Folly or the Future?

have you succumbed to the computer age? Do you surf the 'Net? Do you Yahoo? What is your computer IQ rating — two tin cans and a string, or a Pentium 5? And what does any of this have to do with growing grass?

While computers have made a huge impact on our culture, remember that they are only a tool — not a silver bullet to help repair your every woe. The time savings and efficiency that computers provide are directly proportional to how well you understand how to use them. For example, many superintendents over 50 don't care much about computers, and those in their 40s find computers challenging. But superintendents in their 30s understand random access memory and megahertz, and those in their 20s wonder why their entire courses can't be mowed robotically from their offices.

We need to remind ourselves that even in this electronic age there are still many courses with manual irrigation systems and six-man crews. To this legion of superintendents, computers will remain *Star Wars* toys of the future. But there's no discounting computers' increasing influence — they've even changed the way *I* do business.

I've been the editor of *The Florida Green* magazine for the Florida Golf Course Superintendents Association for 10 years. Over that decade, computer and software improvements have allowed my publisher and I to graduate from faxes to e-mails and from hour-long file downloading sessions to pdf formatted files which take minutes to send and receive. I can view the entire magazine design on my monitor and make any necessary changes *before* it goes to press — a vast improvement over the pile of faxes on the floor.

But what about computers and e-maintenance? There's a tremendous buzz at industry events about online purchasing, GPS mapping and operational tracking. But what does it all mean for the superintendent on a daily basis? If the response to my poll is any indicator, I'd say the pace of computerization of golf course maintenance is slow. I sent out a simple questionnaire to 99 Florida superintendents via my e-mail network and asked them how they used computers at work and only 10 responded.

But for those who use computers, the advantages will put them light years ahead of their competition. Data manipulation helps superintendents prepare budget reports with phenomenal speed, and rapid communication by e-mail has virtually eliminated the phone tag game. And let's not forget the No. 1 computer use in golf course maintenance — irrigation management.

As for online purchasing, it's a feature that's hyped a lot but used sparingly — for the moment. Superintendents are a conservative group who don't like to be treated as guinea pigs. But this will change as a new generation of workers whose lives are shaped by the Internet join our ranks.

There's no doubt that a computer can be a powerful tool on the administrative side of the job. Now sign off from the GCSAA Web site and go check on the crew. There are some things a computer can't do — yet. ■



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