Wired for profits

What going 'on-line' with a new computer system has done for Thornton Landscape Management of Maineville, Ohio. And how it's been done.

by Jerry Roche, editor

Nettling and Thornton *with part of the Slice Computer System*

Wires, wires everywhere. Slithering through wood-paneled offices like a family of pythons. Each with millions of tiny electrical impulses carrying vital information to employees of Thornton Landscape Management, Maineville, Ohio.

Gary Thornton, son of the founder, is asked where the business would be today without an effective computer system. "I don't know," he answers, shaking his head. "But certainly not where we are."

In 1979 Thornton and then newly-appointed computer specialist Randy Nettling, noting that the business was growing faster than Gary's father, William Sr., had ever imagined, began seeking the perfect computer system.

"The closest we could find was a general contracting program," Nettling admits. "Using that program, we found ourselves needing functions we didn't have, and we were also repeating ourselves."

The next step was to develop their own system. Slice (acronym for System of Landscape/nursery Information Control and Estimating) was born.

The landscape contracting and management systems each contain accounts receivable, job costing, estimating and job control, inventory control, purchasing, accounts payable, and general ledger functions. Yet they are two separate systems.

The biggest time-saver, Nettling has found, is with the job costing and estimating functions, both of which

eliminate piles of paper and endless hours of calculations.

"By hand, you tend to make mistakes, transpose numbers," says Nettling. "Then, for each time the customer wants to make a change, you've got to insert new figures and compute them all over again.

"With Slice, each time a customer makes a change, you just pop the new number into the computer and within a matter of 30 seconds you've got a new proposal."

Using a letter-quality printer, the program generates complete bid proposals, which include a cover letter, individualized schedules, description of services, terms and conditions of the contract, and the contract itself.

How large?

How large does a landscape business have to be to consider purchasing a computer?

"There's not an answer to that," says Thornton. "The very smallest businesses can use a computer, even if they're only using it as a word processor. But to justify a complete system, they should be doing a couple hundred thousand dollars a year in business.

"Any business that's growing should be able to afford a computer because it's cheaper than even the cheapest labor."

Nettling observes that a good computer can be purchased with payments of $400 to $500 per month, but

one new person on the staff usually means—including benefits—at least a $1,000 per month addition to the budget.

"Too," Thornton is quick to point out, "we've had people pay for the computer out of the money they *didn't* have to pay for an accountant."

Equipment tracking is an added benefit of landscape computer systems, the pair says. Each piece or type of equipment in inventory can be tracked for maintenance, and issued a cost-per-hour figure, used in buying decisions and job estimating.

"We track our equipment by category," Nettling says, "but we have some people tracking by individual piece. That way, you can come up with a competitive analysis. Plus, you should be able to determine whether you want to buy new equipment or continue to repair it after, say, five years."

Slice is unique in that it is not modeled after the old data processing divisions used by many businesses as little as five to ten years ago.

"We wanted a system that would be sitting on the desk and that would allow everybody to do their thing on the computer," says Thornton. "We are now on equipment that allows us to do that. Our system isn't a data processing department; the processing is distributed out to the people."

All business programs have general ledger functions, which Nettling says can help a business grow faster and

make more money, if used correctly.

"A lot of people are making money, but they can't tell where they're making money," he says. "Then it's time for a computer, because they may be growing in areas where they're not making money. And that will eventually catch up with them."

Side benefits

Besides the obvious benefits of being "on-line," there are some side benefits.

"You become looked upon as the leader rather than the follower," notes Thornton, "the professional rather than the bush-peddler—not only among your peers, but also among your clients and prospective clients."

With the many computer systems available on the market, it is up to the individual landscape contractor to explore the differences between each, and then determine which might be best-suited to his or her particular operation.   **WT&T**

The computer and the green industry: advantages—and a dilemma

by John B. Calsin Jr.

The golf course superintendent must make the same daily decisions as the manager of a small business: preventative maintenance, inventory control, personnel scheduling, and budgeting.

With a computer, he can organize preventative maintenance (PM) schedules, labor/cost accounting, asset management (looking at each piece of equipment and its repair record to determine new equipment purchases), and inventory control.

Along with PM scheduling, the superintendent has a system that can produce work orders. He can also track fertilizer and chemicals in the ground—even the weather.

Lou Ockey, manager of Centennial Systems Inc., of Wayne, Penn., discussed the advantages of using a computer in the grounds maintenance industry for WEEDS TREES & TURF. Here is what he said:

Q. What is the Grounds Management System (GMS) supposed to do, and how did it come about?

Computers are having more and more impact on golf courses. Grounds superintendents are being exposed to them and are beginning to understand what they can do to manage their shops.

Some leading companies are bringing the personal computer (PC) to the grounds superintendent as a part of their product; for example, Toro and Rain Bird with new PC-driven irrigation controllers.

Also, as software matures, it is moving from the accounting function to operation functions such as grounds management. Superintendents coming out of better turf/agronomy colleges are aware of high tech advances.

Centennial Systems, relying on previous experience, put together a set of programs, using four grounds superintendents out of the Penn State University system as advisors. From those programs came an educational session to show other superintendents how they can apply the computer to their trade.

Q. What is a good golf course computer program supposed to do?

A. Allow the superintendent to manage his shop better than he did without it, through the use of a very fast and efficient clerk called the computer.

Q. What must golf course superintendents know before purchasing either hardware or software?

A. Computer concepts and the basics of the computer. We think the machine they should be looking at

Lou Ockey, Centennial Systems manager, *points to a special screen configuration on the IBM personal computer as David Downing (seated) of Kennett Square and Michael Smith, Gulph Mills, look on.*

is the PC. So they should know its components so they know what it is in generic terms, and therefore don't buy something they're not expecting.

They should know generic-type programming aids that they can use, or get started with: word processing, spread sheets, data-based systems, report writers, and graphic packages.

You find you can master the computer much like you master a new piece of turf equipment.

Q. How does the computer help track chemicals in the ground?

A. Right now, every time a superintendent applies a chemical, he puts it into a hand-written log book. The computer can automate that so he will still enter it, but the log book is a computer. It can sort and print the entire report with little effort.

It saves labor and time. He doesn't have to go through the pages of the book and see on what date he applied what chemical to what area and end up making a report of it. The computer generates the report after the data has been entered. It records the days a chemical was applied on the fairways, the temperature, the year-to-date total of the chemical.

A. What kind of guidance from the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) is nec-

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essary for the superintendent, and how will that guidance be helpful to businessmen like yourself?

A. The GCSAA has the resources to point the superintendent in the right direction.

People like Centennial Systems, who supply software, are providing only their perspective based on a background of writing software for country clubs, ag/chem companies, and other horticulturally-inclined businesses, and from my own background in running a small turf management business.

Another perspective can be provided by the GCSAA. It should point the superintendents on a national basis in a uniform direction. And I think it will. We are only one of GCSAA's resources.

Q. But what if the association doesn't give more guidance and direction? What kind of problems could there be?

A. Fragmentation. Presently, there are vendors who are pointing the superintendent toward the use of the accounting systems computer to run grounds maintenance funtions. It won't work. A superintendent can't drive a sprinkler system from an accounting computer. It is a matter of compatibility, depending on computer manufacturer.

For example, we base our software on IBM computers, and IBM has solved the compatibility conflict. IBM has said the S36, a popular mini used in country clubs as a central processor, will be compatible with IBM PCs. So it doesn't matter if you have an S36 in your accounting office or a PC, as long as it's IBM-compatible.

With the right base, a PC can be put in the grounds superintendent's office so it will work well with his irrigation system. It will work well with his preventative maintenance, his inventory, and his budget systems.

Some guys can't do it, so they'll try to bend the superintendent in another direction.

But someone is going to have to take that bull by the horns and get that message out. The age of fragmented application solutions is over—the dawn of club information systems is here.

Ockey's comments bring up an interesting point: the green industry is facing a potentially costly dilemma—computer compatibility.

Software firms are lining up behind hardware manufacturers. One manufacturer's hardware is often not compatible with another.

Equipment manufacturers are incorporating PCs into their product line. Their PCs just might not be compatible with a club's mini computer, which could cost a club thousands of dollars and endless headaches.

Some standard should be decided upon by the GCSAA, leading software development firms, and equipment manufacturers. If it isn't, the new territory will be a barren moonscape rather than a beautiful landscape. □