

Builders go high-tech

By Gerald Frawley

Ten years ago, a guy with a hammer, a pickup truck and a dog named Gus could call himself a builder.

Not so today. Today's builder charges into a job armed with computers, high-tech tools and automation.

Computers are used in everything from designing entire houses and landscaping to keeping closer track of schedules and expenditures. High-tech tools range from nail guns to ultra-sophisticated land surveying tools.

In part, the growing sophistication in the industry can be attributed to the growing sophistication of the builder. According to Builders Association of Southeastern Michigan president James Bonadeo, today's men and women entering the home building profession may appear more comfortable on Wall Street than they do on freshly paved roads of a residential development under construction.

"Young builders today are graduating with associate and bachelor's degrees, and in some cases, advanced degrees in construction management," Bonadeo said.

Universities, community colleges and vocational schools throughout the country have developed comprehensive programs in construction. Trained in technical areas like drafting, carpentry and surveying, younger builders often are required to take courses in higher math, physics, economics, labor relations, management estimating, and yes, computers.

Bonadeo said that the point behind all this is not just to make them good builders, but good business people.

IN A RECENT survey by the National Association of Home Builders business management department,

fully three-quarters of the builders studied use at least one computer. Of the remaining quarter, four of five have plans to computerize.

Senia Wilder, NAHB's business management department director, said building is like any other business — or more succinctly, it is a business.

Like any business, computers have become increasingly more common in offices of builders. General computer applications like maintaining a general ledger, purchase management, payables, receivables, billing, and tax preparation are just as useful for the builder as it is for the retailer.

Many of the same applications used in other businesses have been subtly modified for use by builders. "There are expenses in building a house that are different from running another business, so we need programs that address that so when we go in to talk to accountants, we're not totally in the dark."

But builders also have more specialized needs, she said. Construction estimating, sales and marketing, house design, site design and evaluation, and presentation software specially designed for use by builders has become an increasingly popular way of saving time, work and money.

Literally hundreds of programs are presented to builders each year, but not every program meets the needs of the builder, she said. In 1985, the National Association of Home Builders created a software review program.

"It enables an impartial person to review it based on criteria set up by us," Wilder said. So far, only 12 computer programs have met National Association of Home Builders standards.

ROBERT FIOLEK, senior manager of consulting services of BDO Seidman with offices in Troy and De-

troit, said for the most part, the construction contractors are behind the times in adapting technology to the industry.

In the home offices, where most of planning is done, builders, contractors and subcontractors have gradually coming around — particularly in the use of computers. Fiolek said, but out on the job site, computers and other high-tech tools like laser and computer surveying devices are only now appearing.

Builders have readily adapted the computer to specialized uses pertinent to the building industry.

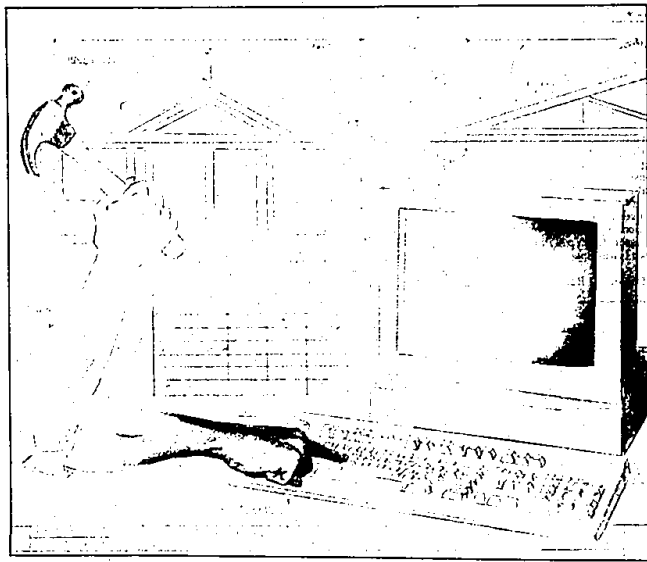
Another high-tech instrument becoming more popular on construction sites is closely related to the computer, Fiolek said.

Hand-held data storage devices which can interact with computers have greatly facilitated record keeping.

The problem with monitoring construction projects has never been at the home office, he explained. "The big problems are out in the field and the guys in charge aren't generally of a clerical nature."

Paper work has always been a problem for the industry, Fiolek said. "These guys they hire for construction are hired for their hands — and they're good at that."

KEEPING TRACK of the number of workers, when they start and stop work, rain days, deviations from schedules and material shipments during a busy day when there are literally hundreds of things occurring at once can be a daunting task, he said. "These are the type of things that are scribbled on the backs of doughnut napkins and are subsequently lost."



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