

Training from PREVIOUS PAGE

Rapid software changes

As commercially available software programs like WordPerfect, Lotus 1-2-3, and dBase become sophisticated enough to meet the needs of a wide variety of business users, the software industry has become dominated by a small number of software houses.

"These programs control probably 90 percent of the market," he said.

Thomas December, general manager and owner of Executrain in Southfield, a franchisee of the largest computer training firm in the country, said while the number of software programs available to the users is smaller, the complexity and speed with which these programs are changing is what has made the computer training industry what it is today.

Executrain training centers number 60 offices in the U.S. and abroad. The company projects 90 centers within two years.

Executrain in Southfield was the 15th franchise 34 months ago.

"Technology is changing so rapidly because of the battle going on between software giants like WordPerfect, Microsoft and Lotus," he said. "There are all these changes happening and no one can keep up without large resources."

Some companies have attempted to develop their own computer training divisions, but these have generally not worked well. "It's hard to provide quality on a consistent basis," December said. But by specializing and only doing one thing, computer training firms can succeed.

"We can offer more and offer it more efficiently," he said.

Training people to use computers means overcoming several obstacles; for example, the fear many

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*Thomas December
general manager and owner,
Executrain in Southfield*

people feel over using the computer. "Because of the reduction in costs, personal computers are ending up lower in organizations and people who never had to operate them are going to have to learn."

"Corporations are starting to set basic skill levels," December said.

Share of a large pie

December estimates the national computer training market is worth about \$2.5 billion a year. The Detroit area, as the ninth largest computer market, is capable of generating at least \$25 million a year.

"No one has been able to capitalize on this market," he said.

Just about any business office with a computer can benefit from training, he said. The days when people were plopped down in front of a computer and told to figure it out for themselves are long gone.

"Corporate America is finding out it just doesn't work that way," he said, adding research done by Executrain indicates a 50-percent increase in computer proficiency and employee productivity for people who participate in its training programs.

Accomplishing this is no easy task, he said, and it is simply impossible for a small computer consultant to do so without the benefits of being part of a larger corporation.

McManus of New Horizons said chief among the benefits of being part of the larger corporation is the way in which a franchisee pool the resources of its members and consolidate expenses.

"Each software company has a new release every five or six months," McManus said. While many of these releases are updates or maintenance versions, some offer major enhancements.

Each new release means new training materials and alterations to course work.

"Coming up with course work, text books and lesson plans for each of the programs we train for is a monumental task," he said.

Word processing programs like WordPerfect and Microsoft Word, desktop publishing and presentation graphics programs like PageMaker, Harvard Graphics, and Freelance Graphics, databases like dBase and Paradox, Spreadsheets like Lotus and Excel — these programs are involved and require extensive testing.

That doesn't even begin to address the growing popularity of project planning programs or Novell Networking and Macintosh applications that businesses demand today, he said.

Franchisees also share in marketing, testing and research and other services like computer hotlines and on-site service.

Writer's frightful near-crash makes test films 'all too real'



DAN MCCOSH

Part of a journalist's mind is a kind of scrambled notebook of all the stories he has covered, which in my case includes a whole lot of real and potential carnage involving automobiles.

A number of years on the police beat looking at accident reports, even more years shredding tires on test tracks, and seemingly endless sessions of dry presentations by engineers about exactly what happens, millisecond by millisecond, as a car crumples into a wad of steel has left me with the frame of mind of a cancer surgeon, learning more than I ever wanted to know about the dark side of cars and crashes.

A few days ago, a young woman parked her car in the right-hand traffic lane on the Southfield expressway in morning traffic, and ambled back to check a loose trailer hitch. Returning from the airport, I suddenly found myself living through something I had studied, practiced, and written about, but never actually experienced.

What set it off was a combination of perceptual phenomena — the young woman carefully

turned on her warning flashers, oblivious to the fact the trailer blocked them from view.

According to traffic researchers, expressway traffic behaves as a fluid, and she was now a rock in the stream. Cars peel away from a stalled car for a minute or so, but each consecutive oncoming driver sees the stalled car at a shorter distance, as it is invisible until the car in front changes lanes.

Testing cars for Popular Science (my regular job) includes a high-speed pass through rubber cones set to duplicate a high-speed avoidance maneuver. We persist in this test while none of the so-called 'enthusiasm magazines' attempt it, to uncover potential chassis problems in the ultimate avoidance maneuver — swerving back and forth the width of a traffic lane at about 60 mph.

As a credit to today's engineers, most cars pass it handily.

At a driving school conducted by Bob Bondurant, he adds a second twist — coming up to a lane change with the brakes locked, and at the last minute, a light indicates which way to go. Now as the stalled car first appeared roughly a hundred feet away, I was looking at a car and trailer, not rubber cones.

Going into the maneuver, I quickly locked, then released some of the pressure on the brakes, a so-called 'trail-braking'

technique that controls the rear end, and headed for the shoulder — an unnatural direction, the left being blocked by traffic.

The notebook pages in my mind quickly flipped to studies of the Bronco II I was driving as having a high-percentage of rollovers in this maneuver, disconcerting since by this time I was drifting toward a low curb. A quick twist of the wheel, to straighten the front wheels as they hit the curb, kept the car on its feet.

All the jockeying was oddly reflexive, after countless hours at the track. Then a highway sign intervened, impacting the door (more studies about the benefits of a full frame in side impact) and I finally slid to a stop.

In a daze, I was startled to see the young woman lean over, ask if I was all right and then drive away. I chased her several miles before she stopped to go through the formalities of an accident. Only then did I realize that not only had she been standing between the trailer and her car, she had left a three-year child in her Jeep. I wondered out loud if she realized how lucky she and her kid had been, or maybe I said how stupid it was to stop in a traffic lane like that.

Her eyes widened at the implication she had endangered her child. "She was in a child seat," she said firmly, her reality considerably different than mine.

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