

KEEPING THE COMPANY'S SECRETS SECRET

"Businesses can be severely damaged when inside information is leaked to competitors," writes the editors of "Small Business Report." According to the brief article, employees may unknowingly reveal confidential information to outsiders, who in turn can use this information to their own favor and against the original company's interests. The article noted that outside sales staffs are particularly vulnerable to such leaks.

They suggest that the following information should be considered private information and protected accordingly:

-- Sales Figures. Knowing a company's sales volume can provide competitors with an advantage

-- Customer Files. Safe guard your client list, and never leave these files open in the presence of customers.

-- Names of Suppliers. Dependable and competent suppliers are an important part of any business, therefore these relationships should be held in the strictest confidence.

-- Profit Margins. This is absolutely privileged information that should never be revealed to any outsider. As the article noted, today's customers can be tomorrow's competitors.

-- Company Problems. Avoid discussing any problems with outsiders because partial information may cause reluctance to deal with the firm, and the problem can be easily blown out of proportion when repeated.

SETTING SOME LIMITS ON COMPUTER COSTS

Trying to determine how much to spend on a computer set-up can be very confusing to many people. They don't want to over-buy, yet they also don't want to under invest and discover too late that they didn't get enough machine to do the job.

According to Doane Publishing's "Agricultural Computing," the wholesale vegetable business developed a formula that seems to work for them, and it may also apply to others.

Here's the formula that the vegetable growers use: 4% of gross revenue up to \$1 million is justified; then 2% of any gross above \$1 million. That would put the top figure at \$4,000 to \$5,000 for farmers grossing \$100,000 to \$125,000.

(Doane's Agricultural Report, Copyright 1986)

Having the necessary supplies

Keep a 3-ring binder full of blank paper (a few sheets of graph paper are useful, too) next to your machine for keeping an abbreviated diary of useful notes and methods.

Also, keep a dispenser of cellophane tape for attaching important notes and reminders to your desk or walls (don't use magnets!), and for taping together wide printouts such as spreadsheets. If you have a printer, keep at least one fresh ribbon and a box of paper ready. Also useful are a ruler, highlighting pen, stapler and bulk eraser. Bulk erasers are available from electronics stores like Radio Shack and should be kept and used well away from your system. In the bottom of your desk keep an emergency cleaning kit with cotton swabs, alcohol, a lint-free rag and antistatic video screen cleaning solution or pads.

Get into a routine

Once you've put in the extra hours necessary to get a good feel for the system, set up a routine for using the computer. Choose a time of the day or week that you would normally have free and make it known that you don't want to be disturbed for trivial matters. One reason for setting up a schedule is to keep from procrastinating or turning data entry into a chore to be dreaded.

When you start to get bored with what you are doing, take a break. Unless you're planning a career as a hacker instead of a farmer, don't spend more than 90 minutes computing at a sitting.

Know when to quit

Nothing ruins your working relationship with a computer faster than a series of frustrating, seemingly unsolvable problems. Look forward to them--they go with the territory. The important thing is not feel like you're fighting against the machine. If you think you've hit a brick wall, take a break. Sometimes the solution to your problems will come only after you get away from the machine a while.

From our experience, 99% of the "unsolvable" problems turn out to be simple things we've overlooked. The other 1% will definitely require some outside assistance. Nobody learns about computers by osmosis; they do it by study, by trial and error and by asking.

Stay involved with a users group

It's important to join or form a users group from the outset of your involvement with a microcomputer. Now that you're on your way to becoming a "local computer wizard," it's very important to stay involved with your users group. For one thing, it's now your turn to help out the novices with sage advice and bitter memories, as you were helped. For another, you're less likely to feel helpless about the computer as long as you've got the support of your users group.

Know when to upgrade or buy a new machine

Although it may hurt the pocketbook, there comes a time when you should upgrade your system. More memory, a hard disk, a higher speed modem, a better printer--all of these will someday be on your shopping list. When you're convinced that you're beating your head against a wall, it's time to seriously consider upgrading.

It's important not to upgrade frivolously. A hard disk will not be too useful if you don't really need it. You may even come to the point where you decide that you'll be throwing good money after bad if you upgrade "old reliable" any further. Instead of pitching the old machine out on the trash heap, see if there are smaller jobs the old machine can perform well. While you're waiting for a lengthy printout on your new machine, it's convenient to be able to use your other machine for a few calculations.

(This article was reprinted with the permission of Doane's Agricultural Report and "Agricultural Computing" newsletter, copyrighted, 1986. The complete series is contained in the ASPA Business Management Newsletters of February/March, April/May and June/July, 1986.)

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