Technology and your office
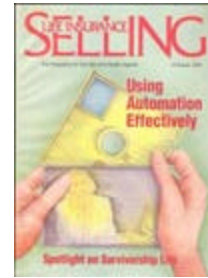
The life insurance business is one of the most computerized businesses in the world. Many products could not be sold without the "what-if" illustrations that accompany them. Only computers can cope with the many paramaters these programs use in calculations.

Life insurance agents also may be one of the largest groups of computer phobics. This especially is true of agents who are talented in many other ways. Some of us who deal with incredibly complex problems with our clients seem barely to cope with the automation in our offices.

There is some risk in labeling oneself a guru or expert in computers and automation, so I do not claim that distinction. I have learned some valuable lessons, however, in my intellectual and emotional efforts with office automation. The organization of my firm's rapid growth would have been difficult if I had not embraced the tools the computer provides. Following are some steps the agent should consider if he or she is going to take advantage of this new technology.

Networking: The days of individuals working on isolated computers are over. The development of inexpensive, high-quality networks has changed the way agents use computers in the office.

A local area network (LAN) enables groups of computer users to work together and share information. In many cases, they can use the same software to work on a joint project. The computers can be connected together for about $250 each, including both the hardware (network cards and cabling) and software. A good network kit is LANtastic, produced by Artisoft.

If the agent has 10 or more computers to connect together, he might look at Novell networks. This is the high end of networking.

Electronic mail: After the agent has installed a network, he can use electronic mail (e-mail) to improve office communication. Where spoken communication among staff members is inefficient, costly, and error prone, e-mail pins down communication through automatic user identification. E-mail practically eliminates handwritten reminder notes and enables staff members to communicate at their convenience without interrupting each other.

For example, if someone is out of the office or on the telephone, another staff member can drop a not on his or her desk via the computer network. When the person later reads the mail, he can reply, forward it to someone else, or simply file the message electronically at his keyboard within seconds. The only time staff members need to visit face-to-face is for more involved decisions.

Of all the automation the agent installs, e-mail and client management will have the greatest impact. The increase in communication, better documentation, and client support will revolutionize the way the agent and his or her staff work.

Client management: From any viewpoint, electronic client management greatly will increase the insurance office's efficiency. Clients will love it because it silently, accurately, and quickly answers their questions. The staff will embrace it because its workload and job complexity are reduced.

The client database is a computer model of the real world of paper files and correspondence. If the database is a good model, it is far more efficient to work with than the real world. For example, a trip to the filing cabinet for a client's paper file may take a minute or more, assuming that no one else has the file. Digging through it, if the files are neat and consistent, may take several more minutes. Finding and reviewing that same data in a computer database may take only a few seconds.

I recognized how important the software is to our office, so I spent a lot of time evaluating the databases available. Let me share what I've learned.

Windows: The computer world straddles the fence between two kinds of computer software, DOS and Windows-based software.

Windows has revolutionized the IBM-computer world. Few new DOS products are being created as most software companies are using their resources to produce Windows-based software. While many of the agent's programs may be in DOS, the agent will need to make the shift soon. It takes time and effort to learn Windows and the new Windows-based software.

The payoff is that Windows software is much more powerful, easier to learn, and more fun. The graphic environment of Windows makes the software seem more natural to use. If the agent's staff has resisted learning to use computers, Windows may be just what the doctor ordered.

Software: Some great software is available, and some poor software as well. I have some favorites to share. These are simply my own opinions.

Every staff member who uses a computer and communicates outside the office needs a fax modem. My choice of software for this application is Winfax Pro 4.0. This software enables any Windows-based application to fax as easily as it prints. Again, I advocate Windows applications. While the computer user can fax from DOS, Windows makes it easier.

Major software vendors have created suites of tightly integrated products tailored to perform common office functions. Microsoft has developed Office and Lotus has Smart Suite. While both are good, in my office we use Microsoft Office. It contains Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and in the pro version, Access 2.0. These programs are a word processor, spreadsheet, presentation package, and database manager respectively.

My office runs on Client Info Plus, the insurance office management program from Mountech Software, formerly known as Upper Thrust Software. Although there are several similar programs, this one seemed the easiest to use and has the most attractive price. I have had a peek at the company's new, soon-to-be released Windows version, and it looks like a great application Most of my life insurance production focuses on retirement and estate planning. I use several programs to analyze data, prepare interactive graphic presentations, and print attractive reports. To calculate maximum exclusion allowances, paycheck comparisons, and state retirement system benefits, I use ProTSA by ICCI Indianer Computer Corporation, Pittsburgh. For formal analyses of estate and retirement scenarios, I use the Path modules produced by Sterling Wentworth. With a laptop computer, the prospect often becomes engrossed in the process of data entry and is amazed by the high quality of the presentation and analysis.

For the more technical questions regarding funding vehicles, legal issues, and tax laws, I use Backroorn Technician from Kettley Publishing Company. Although we, as life insurance agents, are not authorized to give legal or tax advice, it is helpful to be aware of the technical issues regarding the

products and plan designs with which we work. Backroorn Technician also can produce customized reports on any subject listed in its vast reference files.

As I noted above, my office uses LANtastic 6.0 network software. This updated version can operate in either a DOS or Windows-based environment. It includes three dynamite applications: Exchange Mail, Scheduler, and Chat. These are included at no additional cost, whereas the commercial versions of similar products cost hundreds of dollars.

We use the mail program for our e-mail. Scheduler is a powerful scheduling or calendar program. For example, on .a network, I can view each staff member's calendar, select a time when all will be in the office, and automatically send certified mail to each person requesting his or her attendance at a meeting. With Chat, I can "call" another person and carry on a conversation through the computer without ever leaving my office.

There is money to be made for those agents who learn these technological tools. New ways to market and an efficient well-run office can put money into the agent's pocket if the agent knows how to use them. Here are some of my favorites:

Newsletters: The agent can convey current and pertinent information to his clients by designing and publishing his own newsletter. Not only can the agent use the newsletter for additional exposure with his existing clients, but he also can use it as a marketing piece to attract new clients. I use two different applications to develop newsletters and advertising pieces: Microsoft Publisher 2.0 and Aldus Pagemaker 5.0. Publisher is an easy publishing program to use, and contains "wizards" that assist in setting up brochure and newsletter formats. Pagemaker is a complex application, but its features for manipulation of text and graphics are impressive.

Faxing sales literature: This is especially useful if the agent uses the telephone to sell. The agent can have his important sales handouts scanned onto the computer. When selling over the telephone, the agent might say: "Let me show you what I mean. What is your fax number?"

Then the agent can fax the sales information immediately. The agent and prospect can review the information together. If the agent uses Windows-based illustration software, he even can send custom illustrations.

Planning toward the future: With the developments in computer technology, it is possible today to have a "virtual office". With a fax modem, a laptop computer, and a communications program such as PC Anywhere, the agent can tap his office network resources through the telephone line. If the agent travels frequently, this enables him to access information instantly, to his own and his prospects' satisfaction.

The palm-top or personal digital assistant (PDA) revolution is on. Although the AT&T commercial that shows faxing from the beach may seem like a dream, the technology is available now and can interface with the agent's personal or laptop computer. This may be the perfect solution for the administrative assistant with multiple responsibilities.

In the not-too-distant future, I would like to feature on-line services to my clients as my company grows. I could offer clients access to the latest equity updates, insurance proposals, or updates on their tax-sheltered annuity accumulations via their home computers. The possibilities are limitless. Several life insurance carriers have designed "smart apps," computerized applications that are completed and signed on a touch-sensitive screen and sent to the home office via fax for instant processing.

Conclusion: The agent should start investing now in himself and his business by automating the tasks that drag him down. He can start by sending away for free demonstration disks and I literature

to review which packages are best for his office needs and size. The agent will see immediate, long-term improvements in the way he can service his prospects, and his prospects, will reward his efforts.