

What Directors Have to Say

A Look at Child Care Administrative Software

by Michael Kalinowski

“ *f using your computer makes you crazy — if you think you must be stupid, or technically incompetent, or not quite ready for the 21st century when you can't get it to do the simplest thing — don't feel bad. Get mad. When things go wrong, people think it's their fault. But it's not — it's the software. . . . Too many systems are poorly designed, unintuitive, and just plain nasty to use. . . .”*

— Elizabeth Weise (1997)

Computers can speed the organization of operational information, and the *right* software can greatly facilitate entering, updating, tracking, and recalling that information in a variety of formats. Directors have been somewhat slow to embrace — often for excellent reasons such as limited budgets, limited time, and limited information — available technology. Many directors remain somewhat anxious about computers, secretly afraid that they may blow up if the wrong key is pushed, and a bit awkward, as many of us

are, once they become technologically literate.

Today, directors face an increased demand to record, adapt, and recall information on parents, staff, facilities, and programs. They are more likely to manage larger, more sophisticated programs, and they are more likely to feel inundated with day-to-day problems, and overworked but undervalued. Directors require technology to operate their programs in order to enable them to reduce mundane

tasks, and increase the time available for the really important things, like talking with parents (and washing dishes for the sick cook).

About 12 years ago, a few vendors tried to address the needs of directors through the creation of specialized center management software packages, attempting to take into account general administrative needs and the limited computer experience of many directors. While it is accurate to say that since that time child care administrative packages have definitely facilitated the organization of operational information, the promise of such packages as powerful tools for child care administrators remains somewhat unfulfilled. This is especially frustrating when one considers these packages could be almost as easy to use as ATM machines.

Recent research by Thomas Landauer indicates that if every software program were “designed for usability,” productivity in the United States would increase up to 9% per year. It seems apparent that



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child care administrative software packages do increase productivity, but it also seems clear that they have the potential to increase productivity significantly more than they currently do.

Project

It appeared the time was ripe to take a careful look at the availability and usability of computer software for child care center directors and to make recommendations on the future use of such software. IBM, through its Funds for Dependent Care Initiatives, supported this first study of child care administrative software packages. We were awarded the contract for the first phase of this study by Work Family Directions, which managed this project, after their review of invited proposals.

Our review of child care administrative software packages over the past decade indicates several things. First, the market is *volatile*. There have been at least 68 products for sale since 1987, but many companies go in and out of business quickly. Second, the market for these packages is growing but *limited*, perhaps too small for the 23 products currently available. Third, it is primarily an *IBM compatible* market (22 products), with fewer than one in five directors using Macintosh computers (three products). Fourth, packages are currently undergoing significant *product revisions*, due to market pressure and recent Microsoft Windows program improvements. Finally, the market is a *difficult* one, given limited director computer experience but high director expectations for these packages. Since 1985, *Child Care Information Exchange* has provided assistance to directors in an annual child care management software buying guide (cf., Neugebauer, 1997).

There were three major components to our research, conducted between November 1996 and April 1997:

Focus groups. Eight informal focus group meetings were held with 162 directors in seven cities in an effort to better understand individual directors' experiences with using computers in administration.

Survey. We created and mailed a survey to nearly 5,000 directors, from mailing lists provided by three organizations, current or former customers of six software packages, and randomly chosen subscribers to *Child Care Information Exchange*. The overall return rate exceeded 32%.

Reviews. Project staff conducted separate Technical Reviews and Early Childhood Reviews on 20 current child care administrative software packages as well as nine popular business products.

This article will review preliminary findings based on survey responses from *Exchange* subscribers, unless otherwise noted.

Survey

Programs. Nearly three-fourths of *Exchange* survey respondents operate not-for-profit centers, while almost one-fourth operate for-profit programs. Three in four are personally responsible for a single center. About half the *Exchange* respondents operate centers serving less than 100 children, one third serve from 100-199 children, and one in ten serves more than 300 children.

Computer use. Of total respondents, more than nine of ten directors currently use computers for administration. Of those using computers, 85% of the *Exchange* respondents use an IBM compatible.

Slightly more than half use a child care administrative software package, and one in three utilize those packages in a networked environment. Nearly two-thirds have personally used a package less than six years, with the highest percentage (40%) personally using their package between one and three years.

Service. While directors had individual frustrations with the packages they selected, their overall experience appears to be relatively problem free. Half of the *Exchange* administrators reported only minor annoyances with their packages, and just over one in five stated that they can't get the package to do what they want. This response was inconsistent with the litany of concerns received from focus group participants. Three of every four total respondents used technical assistance within the past three months, and almost nine of ten directors requiring assistance received that assistance by telephone by the software vendor. Eight of ten *Exchange* directors were at least somewhat satisfied with the technical assistance they had received over the past six months.

Components. One surprising finding was that only four package components were utilized by more than half of *Exchange* directors. These included accounts receivable (78%), database management (69%), enrollment (60%), and cash receipts (56%). Directors tend to use business software for some tasks. The five most popular activities for business product software is word processing (80%), parent communications (65%), calendars (42%), desktop publishing (39%), and database management (35%).

Features. The overwhelming majority of directors who have used child care administrative software pack-

ages (78%) report the ability to easily customize their package is the most important feature of an ideal program. Other important factors are packages that meet most needs (62%), handle needs quickly (43%), are easy to get service for (38%), and relate components (25%).

Some Preliminary Findings

Directors are not computer savvy. While this is a generalization, and while it may appear obvious to some, it has significant implications for those creating software, for those involved in training directors on hardware and software, and on those in child care organizations responsible for financial management.

Training is needed. The most significant finding from this survey is that directors across the country need assistance in how to use computers, how to identify those needs best solved through computers, how to select software most appropriate to meeting those needs, and how to utilize that software to best solve their problems.

There is no single "best" package. This is a somewhat unexpected finding, but a compelling one. The best package for a particular director in a particular center depends upon at least four factors: needs, computer experience, budget, and learning time available. My friend Nancy Brown would add temperament to that list.

All products can be improved. Even the best products can undergo further modification to better serve the needs of current directors. One recent positive improvement is the ability to download demo versions directly from vendor web sites. Another is the increasing number of packages available on CD rather than disk.

A Few Recommendations to Vendors

Increase customization options. The greatest need, as expressed by directors in all components of the study, is the ability to tailor a basic package to their center's unique requirements. The CD format allows for much greater customization options, some that should be free, and others that require significant technical adjustments, and could be accessed after the initial purchase of the program at a small additional cost.

Design more user-friendly interfaces. One director requested a package that would welcome her each morning with this announcement: "You are one of the best directors in America and you are about to have a glorious day." While this is technically feasible, it may be

more important to adapt packages to the intended user in other ways. Reduce the number of clicks it takes to get somewhere. Lay out choices so that likely options are obvious and can be done easily, in swift and smooth movements. Minimize the need for scrolling. Create helpful error messages that suggest the most likely options rather than make directors feel stupid. Be consistent with the size of buttons. Use color to facilitate navigation. Offer on-screen instructions that suggest where one might want to go next. A good place to start would be a recent article by Michael Dertouzos (1997), director of MIT's Laboratory for Computer Science.

Write in code that interacts easily with standard business products. A director may prefer to use Lotus Word Pro or WordPerfect for word processing because these are more powerful programs than the limited word processing component in a particular package. Administrative software packages are enhanced, not reduced, by facilitating movements between package components and standard business products.

Improve service. Many directors are somewhat anxious about using computers and make heavy service demands, especially in the first few months. Since most technical assistance is provided by vendors over the telephone, it is essential to have product staff sensitive to directors. Technicians should be trained to expect redundant questions, obvious solutions, and slightly confused directors. It is essential they remain courteous and important that they provide support that increases rather than reduces confidence. Empowered, confident directors become better able to resolve more problems themselves, and are more likely to make positive referrals. Some manuals should be rewritten so they are not limited to readers with advanced degrees in computer programming.

Conduct research on why child care administrative package customers tend to use such a small portion of the total package available. Further study needs to be conducted on user rationale for utilizing only four of the many components available in packages.

Conclusion

Mitch Kapor, founder of Lotus, says, "The lack of usability of software and poor design of programs is the secret shame of the industry" (Kreitzberg, 1997). The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our directors, but in ourselves. . . . Child care administrative software packages have taken several steps to increase director productivity, but they have miles to go. Fortunately, we should see major revisions of many packages within the next several months.

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