

# *Hardware? Easy. Software?... What Was the Question Again?*

By Chris Bouchard  
Ross Associates, Inc.

As in virtually every other industry, the successful use of computer software in woodwork manufacturing is becoming not just a smart move, but also a virtual necessity for survival for many firms. Competition is tough, and delays in the adoption of efficiency-creating tools can be terminal. This is not a particular brilliant newsflash. Everybody knows it, however, there is much trepidation among woodworkers to make new investments in computer software vs. machinery purchases. The following will attempt to shed a little more light on the subject, and provide some guidelines for the consideration of new software purchases.

Before we wade into the mire of computer software for the woodworking industry, let's quickly dispense with the issue of its counterpart, computer hardware. If you haven't already done so, get a Pentium4 or its equivalent, with 256 Megs of RAM, a 80 GB hard drive, DVD, CD RW, a good flat color monitor, and a laser printer. Such a system will be in the range of \$2,000-\$2,500. If you already have equipment of a lesser spec, that's okay- just resign yourself to the fact that you will need the above real soon. Otherwise, you will be unable to make full use of the potential of the software that is coming down the line, both in general business software and industry-specific software. By the way - industry sources tell us that computer hardware is likely one of the smaller investments you will make when adopting industry-specific computer technology.

Okay, how about software? That is real easy. Three words: Do your homework. It is not the intent of this article to review all the software innovations that are occurring in the woodwork business. That would take a lot more than the space available in this article. However, we can give you a few ideas as to how to go about your quest for value in woodworking software.

The first logical step is to identify the area of your operation where you need to make advances in

efficiency. A likely exercise is to identify the bottlenecks in your operation. You probably have more than one, so determine which bottleneck, if eliminated or greatly reduced, would have the best effect on your bottom line.



PEOPLE LOGIC SOFTWARE STRONGLY  
RECOMMENDS A HIGH LEVEL OF TRAINING.

Once you have decided on the area of your operation you would like to improve through the use of software, get clear about how much control you want in the equation. Do you want flexibility or do you want the software to more rigidly control the process in which you use it? Most prefer a flexible solution - just bear in mind, however, that the more flexible and adaptable the product is to your way of working, the more you will need to learn in order to really capitalize on it. Fear not, we'll discuss training in a bit.

There have been quite a number of software products introduced in the last couple of years. To varying degrees, many of their creators make claims

of being just a little more of a panacea than they really are. A number of them are very good at certain tasks, but beware the software marketer who claims to have “the one-stop solution” for all your needs. An example of this is a program claiming to be good for drawing and parts production, as well as estimating. It’s true that you actually could do your estimates with Product X. You could, that is, as long as you are prepared to spend a bunch of time drawing the project first, before you can generate a price. If that works for you, go for it. But if your primary need is a good estimating package, be sure that you are considering packages whose primary focus is estimating.

Having identified the likely candidates for your software purchase, consider how each product stacks up against the rest in the following areas:

- **The Company:** Where did these guys come from? Are they computer techies who have little or no wood manufacturing background? Conversely, are they woodworkers who dabble in computers? Obviously, real and proven experience in both disciplines is a big plus.
- **Support:** What options are available? A good system lets you choose the level of support you require. Why pay for full support if you don’t need it? When you need them, are solutions provided quickly?
- **Linkage/Connectivity:** This is an important one. The ability to export and import information from one software product to or from another easily means you can exploit each product’s distinct advantage to the fullest.
- **Extra Cost:** Can the software program you’re considering operate fully in a stand-alone scenario, or is another software program required? Examples of this include some drawing-based packages that require the use of other programs, such as AutoCAD, in order to function fully. That’s not a bad thing, just be sure to include for it in your budget and training considerations.
- **Documentation and online help:** How useful are these? Most software manufacturers are now placing much less emphasis on thick manuals, and relying more on good help files within the program. Are there plenty of “jump points” within the program to get you quickly to the help you need.
- **Access levels:** Naturally, you’ll want as

many staff as is practical to be able to use the software. However, you won’t likely want everyone to have the same ability to “mess with” company -specific preferences within the program. These need to be controlled at a higher level. One example would be material and labor costs and markup levels in estimating software. How does the program manage this?

- **Customized service:** Is it possible to have the program modified to suit a unique feature of your company? A likely area where this would apply is in the creation of custom outputs reports to suit your needs. Most programs will come with a number of
- **“Canned” reports.** Some even allow you to create your own reports, but you will need to learn how to use the report writing software applicable to the program. If you only need a few additional reports created, it is likely to be more cost effective to have the software manufacturer do so (that is, if it’s a part of their service offering, ask).
- **Training:** We saved the best for last. What is the company’s commitment to training? Are they happy to take your money and run, or do they strongly recommend (some actually insist) that you commit to a level of training, which will get you to a point that you actually use and benefit from their product? Beware of loose claims that their software is “easy to use”. Software that will truly make a difference in your operation will only be “easy to use” once you’ve learned its ins and outs, strengths and weaknesses. The time your firm invests in reaching true proficiency in the use of a program will yield a far greater return than any other computer-related initiative, bar none.

Addressing the above issues will go a long way towards ensuring that your purchase of woodworking software will prove to be a wise one. Remember though, your journey will have just begun. Implementing any new system requires your ongoing commitment to making it work, as well as the cooperation of all concerned.