

The Idea Processor: Productivity Tool for Trainers

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While over one quarter million copies of various idea processing programs have been sold, the idea processor is not yet a commonly used computer software item in training. The purpose of this paper is to describe idea processors, to show some examples of actual use and to suggest some additional uses.

Who Needs Idea Processors?

First of all, not all of us need idea processors. Excluded are those who can organize efficiently all their thoughts, plans, programs, courses, outlines, lists, articles, presentations, books and projects using paper and pencil, or a word processor. The rest of us who are sometimes frustrated with the time wasting aspects of shuffling papers or index cards, and find word processors cumbersome for planning will find idea processors helpful. People who work with data have found data processing useful and word users have found word processing useful. Now, idea users are finding idea processors useful.

What Is the Idea Processor?

The idea processor is a special type of text editor that operates on lines of text rather than individual words. The underlying structure of the idea processor is the outline. You enter one idea on each line. Then, you arrange your ideas in a hierarchy, with more comprehensive concepts higher, and subsidiary

ideas lower. You move ideas around very easily, grouping and regrouping them until you are satisfied that your thinking has been represented fully and logically.

If the screen becomes too crowded, you "collapse" your main ideas, in effect hide the detailed sub-structure in the computer's memory. Then you "expand" when you want to work with them again. To highlight an idea, you "hoist" it to the top of the screen and conceal all the non-related material. And then you "de-hoist" it to put it back in its place.

You change and revise your ideas until you are satisfied. Then you print them out on paper. You can always save your work on magnetic disk and return to it later. You can project your ideas on a big screen and discuss them with your colleagues.

Idea processors run on the IBM PC and compatibles, Apple IIe, and the Macintosh 128K and 512K machines. The idea processor may be on its way to becoming the sixth "generic" program for personal computers, the others being: word processor, spreadsheet, data base, graphics and communications.

Historically, the first idea processor brought to market was the Apple II version of "ThinkTank," which came out in 1982. This was followed by the IBM PC version and the Macintosh versions of ThinkTank, 1983 to 1985. In the meantime, other idea processing products were introduced: "Framework," "Maxthink" and "Freestyle."

Who Benefits from Using Idea Processors?

Based on my two years of experience in using idea processors, I believe that everybody who needs to think productively benefits from using an idea processor. The advantages are two-fold: improvement in quality of the work being done and increased

productivity.

How IP's Improve Quality. An idea processor serves as a modelling base for ideas, objectives, strategies and tactics. You generate, develop and evaluate your ideas and strategies on the computer screen. This is much faster and easier than using paper and pencil or a word processing program. The result is that planning becomes more natural, even enjoyable, so that you tend to plan more of your work and to plan it more thoroughly. It follows that if you plan your work more thoroughly, the quality of the work will improve. The more ideas and strategies you generate, develop and evaluate, the more likely it is that you will implement some really good ones.

Increase in Productivity. Idea processors increase productivity in two ways. First, they save time during the planning process, as suggested above. Then, because of the increased tendency to plan and the resulting improvement in plans, more of the plans implemented are successful the first time out and there is no need to do them over again. This saves time and other resources.

How Idea Processors Have Been Used

At present, very few trainers are using idea processors. This might lead one to suspect that perhaps they are not pertinent. I do not believe this to be likely, because the work that most trainers do is not conceptually or structurally all that different from the work done by the hundreds of thousands of people who do use idea processors. What is more likely is that we are seeing the beginning of the adoption process of two innovations at the same time. The first innovation is the personal computer, whose adoption by trainers is perhaps five to ten percent accomplished.

The second innovation is the idea processor, which is just beginning to be adopted.

The idea processor is a program that did not exist at all before 1983, while computers have been used in business since the 1950's and the personal computer has been in use since 1979. The other five generic programs mentioned earlier, word processing, spreadsheets, graphics, data bases and communications, all existed before personal computers. The idea processor did not. It is really a brand new innovation.

Actual applications that I can report now include: (1) outlining articles, such as this one, (2) preparing detailed outlines for others to follow, (3) preparing presentations, (4) analyzing case studies, (5) conducting case study discussions, (6) outlining courses and seminars, and (7) responding fully and concisely to client questions. Space limitations preclude showing examples of all these applications. A brief discussion of the last application will have to suffice.

Ralph Holland's Concerns

About a year ago, I received a letter from Ralph Holland, Director of Training and Development for a large consumer goods company in the Mid West. He expected to be in New York in two weeks and wanted to meet me for half a day to discuss some questions that he had. "By the way," his letter said, "here is the list of questions and could you please make sure to be well prepared." I called him up, we agreed on a fee, arranged to meet in my office, and set a date and time.

Ralph Holland's Questions. These were the questions that Ralph Holland sent me:

1. Strategic planning: to what extent should HR factors be considered in developing business strategies? Reasons why HR factors should be considered. What processes should be used to assure HR factors are properly considered? Any help you can give me in HR strategic planning?

2. Entrepreneurial approaches in large corporations: what kinds of corporate environments are conducive to entrepreneurial behavior? When is it appropriate to encourage entrepreneurial behavior? When isn't it? What are the risks of the entrepreneurial approach? What are the benefits? What are the alternatives to internal entrepreneurship?

How I Used the Idea Processor to Develop Answers. First, I entered the questions into the computer in outline form, using an idea processing program, so that I had two major categories, with about half a dozen items under each one. Then, I filled in outline answers to each of the sub questions until I responded to all of Ralph Holland's concerns. This gave me an outline of about 100 lines, organized in six levels of depth. I edited the material until I was satisfied with it and printed out the results double spaced to allow for note taking. The whole process took two hours and I had a completely responsive, perfectly typed document. With paper and pencil, or even with word processing, I could not have come close to this kind of productivity.

When I met Ralph Holland several days later, I opened the meeting by handing him my document, which was three and a half pages long. He was surprised and delighted.

This is just one example, but I have found the idea processor so helpful, that I use it whenever I have to think about or

plan something that is at all complicated or new to me. It literally helps me to "see what I think."

Other Uses for Idea Processors

Based on my personal experience and on experiences reported to software publishers, listed below in outline form are actual usages from business, and outside of business that may be relevant to trainers.

Deciding what to do.

Planning.

Decision making.

Problem solving.

Running meetings.

Structured meetings.

Brainstorming meetings.

Class sessions.

Writing.

Memos.

Articles.

Books.

Reports.

Preparing.

Presentations.

Courses.

Proposals.

Outlines.

Answering questions.

In a structured, detailed and communicative manner.

Preparing lists.

To do lists.

For you to do.

For someone else to do.

Multi level lists.

Any other kinds of lists.

Taking and organizing notes.

Conclusion

While idea processors have not yet been used widely in training, it appears that they can save time and improve the quality of the work in a great many applications. According to published reviews, idea processors are among the easiest programs to learn and use. Considering their wide applicability to trainers' work, ease of use and modest cost (see note, below) idea processing appears to be highly relevant to trainers.

Technical Note

Three idea processors were used in preparing this paper: two commercially available products, ThinkTank 2.0 and Framework 1.1, and a new product scheduled for release in September 1985, Ready! All three are excellent programs and all three are recommended.

Framework is an integrated program that offers all six generic functions. Its publishers claim that for many people, it may be the only program they will ever need. ThinkTank is a special purpose idea processing program that includes a low power word processor. Framework is powerful, and of necessity more complex and costly. ThinkTank is narrower in scope, much easier to learn and use, cheaper and as an idea processor, more versatile.

The newest product, Ready! is the fastest and lowest priced. It resembles ThinkTank in operation, although it does not

offer the word processing features. Its unique characteristic is the ability to reside in the computer's Random Access Memory (RAM), while another program, such as a word processor, spreadsheet program, or integrated program is in the computer. You switch back and forth between Ready! and the other program simply by touching two keys. In addition, it is possible to transfer an outline created with Ready! to the other program through the keyboard.

For the IBM PC, Framework lists at about \$700 and is available discounted at \$350. ThinkTank lists at \$195, discounted to \$100. Ready! will list at \$100, discounted to \$50 or \$60.