DESQ

A complex integrating package from Quarterdeck Office Systems

BY JOHN LOMBARDI
Review Board

Windows, data sharing, open systems — they're all here in Desq, the big new integrating package from Quarterdeck Office Systems. Does it work? Yes. Do you need it? Perhaps. Does it integrate all your noncompatible software? Almost. What more do you need to know about this product? Lots.

Desq is big, powerful, effective, and complex. It can do an amazing number of things, many of them well, most of them effectively, and some with difficulty. The Desq system provides your computer with a second operating system that works on top of PC- and MS-DOS 2.0. It provides powerful utility features that bring various programs into a similar operating environment. With it you can move information and activity from one window to another as needed. Desq's novelty and power come from its capability to bring dissimilar applications under one operating umbrella without losing the identity or capacity of the participating programs.

You perform tasks inside windows. Desq permits nine windows to be open and operational at the same time. Desq creates space for the program, starts the application, and then turns the work over to you. When you switch from one window to another, whatever is going on in the window you leave stops when you activate the second window, and it restarts when you return. You can use each window for the same, or different, applications. This allows you to closely coordinate different but related tasks and facilitates data transfer, one of Desq's other principal features.

What do you do with numbers in a spreadsheet that belong in the middle of a word processing document? How do you move database records into the documents prepared for publication? Most solo applications have a variety of file formats that help transfer information from the internal format of data storage to an external format for data transfer. Unfortunately, software producers do not adhere to any universal standard, making data transfer difficult or impossible. Sometimes this is

John Lombardi is a professor of history and author of five books. He has been working with computers since 1967.

clever marketing, designed to encourage you to buy other programs that share special file formats; in other cases, it simply represents poor design. Desq addresses this problem in many ways.

In addition to windows and data transfers, Desq provides facilities that clarify normal "housekeeping" commands in the operating system. Most of the major DOS utilities have a counterpart command in Desq that makes using these facilities

InfoWorld

R e p o r t   C a r d

Desq

	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Performance	☐	☐	☐	☑
Documentation	☐	☐	☐	☑
Ease of Use	☐	☐	☑	☐
Error Handling	☐	☐	☑	☐

Summary: Desq offers power, complexity, and a multitude of features in a product that integrates existing applications in a window environment and makes data transfer as easy as possible. The program requires considerable knowledge about IBM PCs, DOS 2.0, and the applications involved to set it up and use it effectively.

Product details: List price: $399. Available for IBM PC, PC XT, and hardware compatibles runnning PC- or MS-DOS 2.0. Requires at least 320K RAM; hard disk; one floppy; monochrome monitor. Color display, mouse optional; 512K RAM recommended. Published by Quarterdeck Office Systems, 1918 Main St., Suite 240, Santa Monica, CA 90405; (213) 392-9851.

relatively simple and painless.

That, in barest terms, is what Desq does. Sounds simple? It's not. Making a shared environment that can cope with the incredible variety of programs available for PC- and MS-DOS computers would challenge any programming virtuoso and strain computers much larger than the IBM PC. Indeed, this gem requires a load of hardware for the typical IBM PC or PC-compatible owner. You'll need at least 256K of random-access memory (RAM) to start up Desq, along with a minimum of 1.5 megabytes of hard disk storage to hold the Desq system files.

That's just for the Desq system, which itself doesn't perform any applications. You'll have to add whatever memory you may need to run your largest application — say 192K RAM for Lotus' 1-2-3 or 128K RAM for Word Star 3.3. If you expect to have several applications running together that occupy two or more windows at once, you may need more. Thus, 512K RAM and 10 megabytes of hard disk storage would be comfortable — but not excessive — space for the Desq system. If you like, you can also add a mouse. Desq supports several popular mice. (We did not test the operation with one.)

Installing Desq takes little time and is easy. The system comes on four diskettes, three for the system and one for the Agent Library (more about that later). Of these disks, the first is the Desq starter disk, which is copyprotected. You do not receive a backup until you send in $15 and your registration card. You must have the starter disk in drive A: each time you begin a Desq session, even if you start the program from the hard disk. If you damage the starter disk — which comes with its write-protect notch uncovered — before you have received your backup disk, you have to wait.
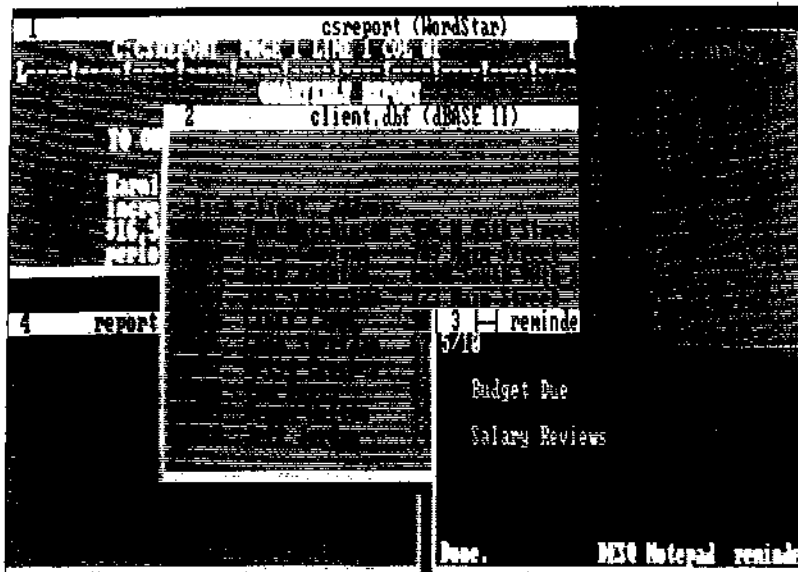
Once you install the system on the hard disk, the excitement begins. This system has more features, options, possibilities, and arrangements than DOS, Word Star, and Lotus combined. This provides impressive power, awe-inspiring complexity, and substantial knowledge to get the most

FOUR SYMBOLS: Top-notch product
THREE SYMBOLS: Recommended
TWO SYMBOLS: Try before you buy
ONE SYMBOL: Not recommended

Desq allows nine windows to be open and operational at the same time. You can use each window for the same, or different, applications, which makes data transfer easy.

from this system. Although the system may be easy to use, getting ready to use it takes time, patience, and considerable knowledge about Desq and its applications.

Desq comes with only one application, a useful notepad program, which serves as a simple text editor but also aids in transferring information between programs. Before Desq can do you any good, you have to attach the programs so that Desq can recognize them and their peculiarities. There are two ways to do this.

The first and easiest involves attaching major, best-selling products such as Word Star, 1-2-3, Multiplan, or dBase II. Desq comes ready for these, and if you've got the program, Desq has the hooks to attach it. These hooks come in an Agent Support Library. Agents, in Desq lingo, are files that identify an application program to the Desq system. Agent Support refers to special Agent files, developed by Desq publisher Quarterdeck, which explain applications to the Desq system in great detail so that the system can take full advantage of all the application's features.

The Agent Support Library currently recognizes several applications: dBase II; Fast Graphs; 1-2-3; Multimate; Multiplan; PFS File, PFS Report, and PFS Write; Supercalc 1, 2, and 3; Visicalc; and Word Star.

If you have any of those programs, all you have to do is specify the matching Agent Support file, tell Desq on which diskette or hard disk volume the application resides, and explain how you want the application to begin. Then, if you want to use Word Star, for example, all you do is open a Word Star window. After a short

wait it is ready to go. You can use either the Word Star commands for most functions, or the Desq versions of those commands.

Of course, many useful programs aren't on the Agent Support list. To use such programs, you attach them by creating your own Agent to support them. The Agents you create aren't normally quite as fancy as the ones Quarterdeck supplies, but they work perfectly well. If you've got the time and energy, you can develop a large collection of help and assistance information that can work with your programs as well as the Desq-supported ones.

What doesn't work? It is hard to tell. Desq says that programs must behave well in using hardware and the operating system. If the programs try to skirt normal methods of operation, they may not work with the Desq system. Most of what we tried worked, except PC-Talk III.

Desq can learn scripts or sequences of characters and later associate them with a single key. To do this you turn on the learn facility, type the desired information, and turn off the learn facility. Although it sounds simple in theory, it can take quite a bit of practice to get it right, but it works. You can use these scripts to issue instructions to application programs or Desq, and to initiate complex data-transfer operations among windows.

Desq works hard at data transfer. It knows about the Data Interchange Format (DIF), ASCII text files, dBase II files, SYLK files (for 1-2-3), and several other formats. It can transfer your data from 1-2-3 to Word Star, from dBase II to Multiplan, and from Visicalc to 1-2-3.

If you need to move data from one Word Star file to another, nothing could be simpler. Open two windows, both running Word Star, ask Desq to mark the text you want to transfer, move to the destination window, ask Desq to perform the transfer, and in a few seconds you have it where you want it. This works the same for any other program. Desq types all the commands the application program needs to extract the marked block, keep the text in a temporary location, activate the destination window, and insert the text in the destination window.

When you want to move among different applications, the scenario gets trickier. If the two applications have Agent Support from Desq and share a file format (DIF, SYLK, ASCII text), Desq thinks it can perform the transfer and will try. The best results occur when the format shared by any two programs is something like a DIF file with all the information about the data clearly identified. The least satisfactory results often involve simple ASCII file transfers. It all depends on what you want to do.

If you want to move a 1-2-3 spreadsheet into a word processing document, then ASCII transfers work fine. But if you want to move a Multiplan spreadsheet into a 1-2-3 spreadsheet, you've got a problem. Desq tries, but it can't handle complicated labels, it won't transfer formulas, and it omits columns when transferring from Multiplan to 1-2-3. This happens not because Desq performs the transfer incorrectly, but because 1-2-3's conventions for receiving text can't handle blank fields and because Desq's conventions for defining columns in ASCII data can't handle long labels having more than one blank character.

This is an instance of a difficult transfer that illustrates the complexity and variability of data transfer. Of course, Lotus understands DIF files and Multiplan understands SYLK, and though these two systems may be incompatible, they are probably translatable. Desq does not translate file formats; it transfers only the formats that the attached application can produce.

When all else fails, Desq lets you take a "snapshot" of the source screen and put it in the notepad. Then it lets you define columns or regions in the notepad and transfer them one at a time to the destination screen. This works even with programs that don't create text files. For example, the display screens of application programs can be placed in the notepad and then transferred to a word processing program for use in making training materials.

We could go on at great length about what Desq does and doesn't do. The manual, about 500 pages, is well-done,

clear, and honest. It warns you when things might not work, tells you how to experiment, and does not offer false hopes that software compatibility comes easy. Technical detail appears when essential, examples are clear and helpful, and the explanations are thorough. The index is a bit skimpy, a minor flaw.

Bugs and errors probably exist in this initial version (1.0) of the package. In our exploration of the product we found only one significant error. The filing menu left off the colon in a DOS command (Mode Lpt1:=Com1:0), thereby rendering the command inoperative. We found some difficult transitions when first loading 1-2-3 or Multiplan, evidence of some rough, though minor, edges in the product.

In short, Desq has great power, capacity, complexity, and utility. You need lots of hardware and memory to run it, and if you use programs that require heavy and complicated keyboard use, their speed and responsiveness may be slightly reduced. Data transfer with Desq works better than with almost any other product we've seen, but it won't do everything.

Desq, with good documentation, useful help screens, and impressive flexibility, requires considerable knowledge about IBM PCs and the applications involved to make effective use of its power. If you're not sure about memory size, DIF files, disk buffers, and the details of your spreadsheet's capabilities, you'll need a friendly expert to help you set up this system to fit your needs. Once it's running, though, it can be very helpful. The copy protection system that uses a start-up disk detracts from the convenience of the hard disk-based system. The failure to include a backup with the original package is inexcusable for a system of this price.

As happens with programs of this complexity and size, the speed of some functions appears slow because Desq does a lot of reading and writing to the disk to manage the windows efficiently. Many users may find Desq of special value when working with multiple applications, but they may choose to run outside of Desq those applications not requiring data transfer.

We have hit only the high points of what is a versatile and powerful system; a full review would take most of this magazine. But if you are interested in using a window environment that facilitates data transfer — while still allowing you to use your existing programs — this is it. ☐

DAYFLO
A database manager and text processor

BY JONATHAN MARSHALL
Review Board

The designers of Dayflo must have had disorganized journalists in mind when they dreamed up this ambitious database manager and text processor.

Consider the typical information junkie's office: to the right, four filing cabinets topped by stacks of yet unsorted papers. Behind them, 10 neat piles of paper waiting their turn to be processed and catalogued. In short, the office is drowning in materials that seem to collect much faster than they can be processed.

Dayflo is a computer solution for the word-intensive workplace or study. It has little or no facility with things like numbers, graphs, spreadsheets, or accounts. But it deserves attention from writers, editors, secretaries, and managers because of its exceptional capability to handle unstructured information.

The program simulates the office environment. Records and data are divided among central files, working area "stacks," trash disposal, and the computer screen. You can retrieve, edit, and move information among all of these locations.

Dayflo supplies a no-frills but adequate text processor that allows you to write memos, letters, and reports from within the database environment on "scratch

Jonathan Marshall's computer experience began in 1982 when he used his IBM PC to publish a newsletter. He is a professional journalist whose writings on computers have appeared in InfoWorld and in metropolitan daily newspapers.

pads" (blank screens). Or you can bring in outside data, including spreadsheets, from other programs like 1-2-3 or dBase II.

You can whip up a letter, insert a name and address from a stored list, print the letter, and send duplicates to an "outgoing letters" stack and to the central file. When you don't need it any longer, just send it to the trash.

An individual record (a letter, an address and phone number, or the like) can vary in length up to 32,000 characters — and unlike many programs, this one doesn't insist on fixed field or record lengths. It stores new data in only as much space as needed. Within a 65,000-record limit, a single database can be as large as the room left on your hard disk.

If all this sounds flexible, it is. Only a handful of database managers permit storage and fast retrieval of such unstructured information.

Best of all, Dayflo permits multiple entries within a single field. Suppose you have a client address list with a space for a phone number. If your client has but one phone, no problem; but what do you do when he or she has three numbers?

In a traditional database, you must either set up every record to contain Phone1, Phone2, Phone3 as fields, wasting space and making record searches much more difficult, or set up separate records for the same person, each with a different phone number.

All that can get frustrating fast. Yet Dayflo handles the problem elegantly by allowing you to put multiple phone numbers (or whatever) into single field. That's so easy — yet so rare in most software today.

But all this flexibility comes at a price. Dayflo is definitely not for the fainthearted. The program gobbles up 1.3 megabytes of disk space, requiring a hard disk (preferably 10 megabytes or larger) and a minimum of 256K of memory (it likes to see even more).

> *Dayflo is a computer solution for the word-intensive workplace. It has little or no facility with things like numbers, graphs, spreadsheets, or accounts.*

It comes with two unprotected system disks, a tutorial data disk, an enormous reference guide, two thick tutorial books, a shorter 81-page "fast track" introduction to the program, and a nine-page reference card.

Though the documentation is clear, well-written, and professionally printed and illustrated, plowing through the sheer bulk of all the fine print can be a little daunting. And plow through it you must. The fast track introduction to the program doesn't even tell you how to set up your