DESKTOP COMPUTERS

Not the Right Combination

WANG'S OFFICE ASSISTANT TRIES TO JOIN DEDICATED WORD PROCESSING, OTHER APPLICATIONS, WITH AVERAGE RESULTS

BY JOHN LOMBARDI
Review Board

Dedicated word processing systems for offices have been hit hard by the proliferation of personal computers and high-quality word processing software. More flexible and cheaper than the dedicated system, the personal computer seems destined to capture the American office. Wang Laboratories, which made its mark in office automation especially with dedicated word processing systems, has countered the personal computer onslaught with hardware and software products that capitalize on the company's extensive experience.

The latest is the Office Assistant, which consists of a tightly integrated combination of hardware and software designed to create an efficient, single-user workstation for the business environment. The package reviewed has a high-resolution green screen, Wang keyboard, system unit with one disk drive, an additional disk drive, printer, word processing and text management software, system software, and Microsoft's Multiplan spreadsheet.

Although it uses an Intel 80186 microprocessor and runs Multiplan, this hardware bears only a superficial relationship to an MS-DOS standard machine. It is only meant to be a Wang word processing system that also runs some other programs. The most telling sign: The two half-height, 360K disk drives produce disks incompatible with MS-DOS data disks. Instead of waiting for your action, the disk drives automatically read a disk when the door latch is closed. Therefore, you won't be able to use any IBM PC-compatible programs with this machine or exchange data disks between Multiplan on a PC, for example, and the Wang machine.

Inside the Office Assistant's system box, the main (in fact, the only) circuit board attached to the top shows no slots for add-on boards. The main board contains all the computer's chips, including the 80186

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microprocessor and 512K of main memory.

The Office Assistant comes on with a loud beep, repeated often when working through the many menus, a beep so loud that office workers are likely to rapidly become tired of the noise. (We could find no way to turn the sound down or off.) After the beep, it tests the hardware, then starts

SUMMARY

Designed as a hybrid between Wang's dedicated word processing machines and a personal computer, the Wang Office Assistant leaves some things to be desired. The word processing program is a faithful, though not complete, copy of the usual Wang software, and the supplied version of Multiplan works as it does on an IBM PC. But the incompatibilities between this machine and existing applications, lack of software, and relatively high price make it an inadequate substitute for a personal computer.

PRODUCT DETAILS

List price, $2,395 (basic model), $5,949 (as tested). Basic model (2.1) contains an 80186 microprocessor running Wang proprietary operating system. Includes one disk drive: 256K RAM, second disk drive optional; includes bundled word processing, text management, and Multiplan software. Manufactured by Wang Laboratories Inc., One Industrial Ave., Lowell, MA 01851; (617) 459-5000.

the system disk provided, which presents the first of an almost never-ending series of menus.

Like many dedicated word processing systems, Office Assistant leads you through all activities and functions with a menu. You continually select and choose, moving from menu choice to menu choice until you get to your work. Even after you are there, however, when you want to change, underline, delete, insert, or whatever, you either select from a menu or press a dedicated function key. The Office Assistant, because it mimics the Wang system, makes extensive use of the Wang keyboard's many labeled function keys.

Within the Office Assistant world, everything belongs to an activity. Word processing, printing, forms, typewriter, filing, and maintenance are selected from a menu. You can set up some of these activities in memory at the same time, making it easy to switch from activity to activity, but there is a limit to how many activities and documents can be in memory at the same time.

Each time you begin an activity, you need to put a disk in one of the drives and select from the appropriate menu. When the activity is attached, you can use it simply by pressing a key.

The word processing program looks and feels much like the dedicated version that runs on any of Wang's shared processor machines. The Office Assistant is a faithful imitation of the real thing, although with some limitations. A major one is the great deal of disk shuffling that goes on as you work. After considerable experience and practice, we think this could be minimized, but the structure of the system encourages lots of disk changes.

Compared to Multimate, Wordstar, and other high-end word processing software for personal computers, the Office Assistant's word processing capability ranks about in the middle of the better programs. It does most of what you want but not always as easily or as gracefully as other programs. It does footnotes but doesn't renumber them, it does move and copy but nothing longer than a page. Sometimes, not even that much will fit in memory. Moved or copied blocks must be remarked after each operation. The program handles mail-merge operations, but materials to be merged cannot exceed 256 characters.

A page-oriented word processor, the Office Assistant can handle pages 120 lines long, or no more than 8,000 characters per page. The largest document possible is about 40 to 60 pages, depending on content, and is limited by disk space. The largest possible page has 120 lines. Like most page-

oriented systems, the software handles page breaks less gracefully than document-oriented systems. The formatting capabilities of the system, however, are superior.

The high-resolution screen provides exceptionally clear characters and the software displays print enhancements on the screen. The screen represents an exact duplicate of the paper, so if you want a 10-space left-hand margin, you will have 10 empty spaces along the left margin of your screen throughout the document being edited. Under these conditions, only lines of 70 characters or less will fit on screen, although the Office Assistant will handle longer lines on the screen by using horizontal scrolling.

The filing and maintenance activities mentioned above take the place of operating system utilities for managing disks and files. Because the programming for each of these activities is contained on a separate disk, more swapping of disks becomes necessary.

The forms activity provides an excellent system for establishing formats for filling out preprinted forms. The system works well, allowing you to create a template on the screen that will match exactly what appears on a preprinted form. You have to do the setup only once using the system printer and the form; every time you need to fill out the form, you call up the forms activity, select the appropriate form, and fill it in. The Office Assistant and the printer type the information exactly where it should appear on the form.

The second interesting activity in this area is the typewriter mode, in which the Office Assistant and printer become a typewriter. You can either type directly, each keystroke going immediately to the printer, or type a whole line, correct it, and then send it to the printer. This system works nicely for envelopes and other odd-size items or quick notes.

The Office Assistant supports two different Wang printers. The unit we tested came with the better and faster of the printers, the Wang PM014 daisy-wheel printer, rated at about 50 characters per second. It zips right along and produces printing of excellent quality. The Office Assistant can support a wide range of daisy wheels including proportionally spaced fonts, although you do have to use the printer disk to get those font instructions attached to the printing software.

The maintenance activity includes such functions as preparing disks, copying the system disk, changing keyboard characteristics, and installing optional software. In addition to the word and text management software that comes with the Office Assistant, the system has the capability to attach other software, although only programs specially prepared for the Office Assistant

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The Office Assistant from Wang attempts to bridge the gap between dedicated word processing machines and personal computers, without much success.

environment will work. This test system
came with Multiplan 2.1, which attaches to
the system with the name Plan. This version
of Multiplan works just like it does on the
IBM PC.

Because the Wang Office Assistant is a
non-standard system, products from the
IBM PC or other microcomputer libraries
cannot be attached. Moreover, once you
have installed a program on one Office
Assistant, it will not work on any other
Office Assistant, although you can make
backup copies. Worse yet, there are no
instructions provided for moving text files
from the Office Assistant to any other
computer system. For a machine that might
be attractive in an environment with
dedicated Wang machines and IBM PCs, the
capability to move files would be a major
advantage.

The documentation that comes with this
system is quite extensive and serves well as
user training manuals. The large, clear, and
comprehensive *Word Processing Training
Guide* offers excellent instruction on the
basics and includes some technical informa-
tion not included in the user guide. The user
guide provides a reference manual for each
of the activities and menus available in the
system. Both manuals include descriptions
of error messages and indexes, although the
indexes are a bit skimpy. Our copy of
Multiplan did not come with a manual,
although one is evidently available.

The printer manual has good instruc-

tions and a technical specification section
that outlines its capabilities. There is also a
good *Unpacking and Installation Guide*
and an update with various errata identified.
The system includes a small scheduling
program that can send phone numbers to a
compatible telephone device. We did not
test this feature.

Wang is famous for lots of support, and
this product has several levels of assistance.
First, there is a toll-free hot line that
provides prerecorded information on a wide
range of topics. You need a touch-tone
phone, as well as persistence, to use this
system. We called on Sundays, evenings,
late nights, and early mornings and always
got busy signals. There is also a call-back
support service for more complex technical
problems that we did not use. The manuals
say these services are available for a period
of time but don't specify that period.

On balance, the Wang Office Assistant
might be a good choice for a Wang office en-
vironment in which strict control over
machines and software may be desirable.
The word processing software with the
product is adequate for office use but not
any better than what is available on stand-
alone machines from many manufacturers.
The closed nature of the system, the lack of
alternative additional software and other
accessories, and the difficulty of transfer-
ring files severely limits the usefulness of
the Wang Office Assistant as a substitute for
a full-feature personal computer. □