IMPRESSIONS

Word for Word vs. Software Bridge: A Conversion Contest

BY JOHN LOMBARDI

I recently looked at two strong general-purpose word processing file conversion products: Mastersoft's Word for Word and Systems Compatibility Corp.'s Software Bridge. Both are standalone products with multiple file formats and many options to improve ease of use and the accuracy of file conversion.

A conversion program must be capable of converting a large number of word processing file formats into two standard formats: ASCII and DCA/RFT. ASCII format is the least sophisticated. DCA/RFT is an IBM standard for document interchange that has more information about the document but lacks refinements such as fonts.

The evaluation of conversion software offers some difficulty as, almost by definition, an accurate translation isn't possible between sophisticated word processing systems. However, several characteristics do distinguish these programs.

SUPPORT, EASE, ACCURACY. First is the coverage of word processing programs. That is, the number of different word processors handled by the programs (see accompanying lists). Second is ease and flexibility of operation. Third is the accuracy of translation and the arrangements for handling nontranslatable elements of the source or target system.

Software Bridge has the advantage of a comprehensive conversion routine for Macintosh word processing file formats, which may be of significance for users who work in both PC and Mac environments. Both programs have multiple ways of handling ASCII files, either keeping them looking as they did on-screen, using blanks and blank lines to get the desired appearance, or producing the original document file as a text stream

without attempting to preserve anything except the text. Word for Word has an option to turn all paragraphs into single long lines, a method useful for some publishing and typesetting programs.

Word for Word has EBCDIC file conversion to conform to mainframe environments that require characters coded in that format; and it also has a COM format that converts a file into 7-bit characters, permitting transmission over virtually any modem to another system (although this format requires a copy of Word for Word at the other end). Word for Word has a Lotus 1-2-3 conversion that converts spreadsheets to ASCII by using spaces or tabs to format the table.

FLEXIBILITY IS KEY. Both Word for Word and Software Bridge offer help identifying a source file and type and then fixing a target file and type. Software Bridge has the more flexible system, including an auto-match facility that automatically identifies the source word processing format and converts it to the target format.

Each program will run from the command line by specifying a list of parameters, permitting the use of the programs from within batch files or other automatic systems if desired. Software Bridge, however, offers the greatest flexibility in customizing the operation of the program and handling various peculiarities of the file transfer process. For example, Software Bridge includes a function that will set up automatic character translation in the event that a character used in one word processing system is not available in another, or is interpreted differently. In addition, Software Bridge lets you specify font translation information that improves the accuracy of conversions involving soft fonts or other laser printer sophistication.

Word for Word has a feature that will insert a code into the target wherever a feature of the source cannot be converted; you can look up the feature and discover what was not transferred through the conversion. Word for Word can also create an exceptions list for each converted document that writes each unconvertible feature to a disk file for subsequent review.

The performance of these products with relatively uncomplicated text using minor enhancements such as boldface and underlining is good, although neither one will transfer every characteristic. With more sophisticated text, both systems fail with greater frequency, producing target text that misses features or has an appearance substantially different from the source. Neither product works with the graphics images included in products such as Word Perfect 5.0.

Word for Word and Software Bridge — both at $149 — are solid products. Software Bridge offers more flexibility and customizability and is somewhat easier to use. It also includes Macintosh word processing formats. Word for Word and Software Bridge exceed the conversions available in high-power word processing packages. Software Bridge may be the better product because of its greater sophistication, customizability, and ease of use if, of course, the conversion you need is included in its list. Word for Word includes conversion routines for Lotus 1-2-3 spreadsheets.
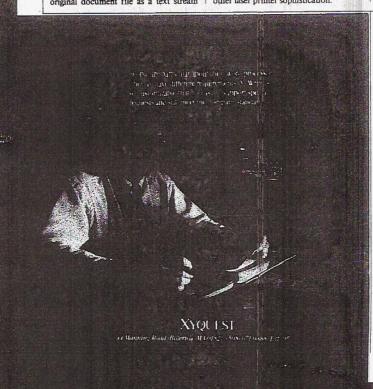
FILE FORMATS SUPPORTED. *Word for Word 4.2.* ASCII (smart); ASCII (standard); ASCII (stripped); DCA/RFT; DEC/DX; Displaywrite Native (from only); EBCDIC; Enable 1.1, 2.0, 2.15; Excel 2.1; FFT; Framework III 1.0, 1.1; HP Advance Write Plus; IBM Writing Assistant 1.0; Lotus 1-2-3 1a, 2.0 (spaces, tabs);

Lotus Manuscript 2.0, 2.1; Mass 11, 8.0; Multimate 3.3; Multimate IV; Multimate Advantage II 3.6, 3.7; Microsoft Rich Text Format; Microsoft Word 3.0, 3.1, 4.0, 5.0; Navy DIF; Office Writer 4.0, 5.0, 6.0, 6.1; Peach Text 5000 2.12; PFS:First Choice 1.0, 2.0; PFS:Write C; Professional Write 1.0, 2.0, 2.1; Q&A Write 3.0; Rapid File 1.2; Samna Word IV and IV Plus, 1.0, 2.0; Total Word 1.2, 1.3; Volkswriter 3, 4; Volkswriter Deluxe 2.2; Wang PC Version 3.0; Word Perfect 4.1, 4.2, 5.0, 5.1; Wordstar 3.3, 3.31, 3.45, 4.0, 5.0, 5.5, 6.0; Xywrite III, III Plus.

Software Bridge 4.1. ASCII (standard); ASCII (smart); DEC WPS-PLUS up to 3.0; Displaywrite 2,3,4 through 1.0; First Choice through 3.0; IBM DCA/FFT; IBM DCA/RFT; IBM Writing Assistant through 1.01; Mac Write II through Version 1.1; MASS 11 through 8.0; Microsoft Rich Text Format through 1.0; Microsoft Word Mac through 4.0; Microsoft Word PC through 5.0; Microsoft Word for Windows (through RTF); Multimate through 4.0; Navy DIF; Nota Bene 3.0; PFS:Write A, B, C; Professional Write through 2.1; Samna through Samna Word IV; Smartware II through .4.0; Sprint through 1.0; Volkswriter 3 and 4 through 1.0; Wang PC (IWP) through 2.6; Word Marc through Composer Plus; Word Perfect Mac 1.02 through 1.03; Word Perfect PC through 5.1; Wordstar 2000 through 3.0; Wordstar through 5.5; Xywrite through III Plus.

Mastersoft, 6991 E. Camelback Road, Scottsdale, AZ 85251; (602) 277-0900.

Systems Compatibility Corp., 401 N. Wabash, Suite 600, Chicago, IL 60611; (312) 329-0700.

Impressions are brief looks by InfoWorld staff and reviewers at products that have not been through a formal review.