

# One Last Compile...

## Reporting for duty

As regular readers will know, one of my major bugbears is the irrational, obsessive attitude that customers seem to have for reports. The user-friendliness and tremendous functionality of a piece of software can, and does, go right over their heads. What they're interested in is pieces of paper.

It would be fractionally less irritating if they wanted these pieces of paper for the right reasons. After all, even I appreciate that browsing through endless columns of sales figures is more easily accomplished on a piece of paper than on the screen. If it was because they can then interpret the information more easily, then I would have some sympathy. But this isn't the case.

It's only recently that I've discovered what the real reason is, and it was because of Microsoft Office.

Now, you can say what you like about Microsoft Office. Bloated, over-designed, slow... yes, thank you, I know all of this. But when you look at Excel, Word and PowerPoint, you should be profoundly grateful for two things. One, everybody's got it. Yes, occasionally you'll come across a brave company who are clinging to 1-2-3 or WordPerfect, but they're pretty thin on the ground. For the most part, you can safely assume that 80% of your customers are going to have the unholy trio of Excel, Word and PowerPoint lurking somewhere on their hard drives. And this makes your life easier. (The second thing you should be grateful for is that on one version of Word, Microsoft overshot their release date by *four* years. Which kind of takes the pressure off developers everywhere, I feel.)

Anyway, back to my users. Because everybody seems to have Office, we took the not unreasonable decision of majoring on it for reporting purposes. There isn't a TDataSet in our system that isn't

now primed for pouring carefully into an Excel Spreadsheet, or ruthlessly merged into a Word mailing template. We were rather pleased with ourselves about this. We felt that, by doing this, and by giving them extensive and flexible search options, we had now opened up the system for our users to create whatever reports they wanted. Life from now on would just be an endless series of fat royalty cheques.

Your world won't be rocked, I'm sure, by the news that things have not worked out quite like that. The first time we demo'd the system we ran through the data input screens, created a few graphs, showed them some searches. Then we cheerfully braced ourselves for the question that, sure enough, dutifully followed: what about the reports?

We demonstrated doing a search and exporting it to Excel. The data was exactly what was required, in a nice, convenient, flexible format. Not beautifully laid out, true, but the essence of what was required was there. We sat back, glowing with smugness.

The client's brow furrowed. Clearly something was wrong. But perhaps he wasn't an Excel sort of person. We exported it to a basic Word template instead, and looked at him hopefully.

Nope, still furrowed.

He cleared his throat. 'Er, it's a bit basic-looking, isn't it?' he asked.

We explained that well, yes, it was, but it used a very simple template, and it was just an example. He could design his own template to look however he wanted. Bold, italic, big text, little text, the world was his oyster. The only limits were his imagination. And so on.

He looked horrified, and struggled for a moment to gather his thoughts. Eventually he came up with it, and in doing so dropped his bombshell.

'But that's the sort of thing I expect the computer to do,' he said.

You may think your users want software to give them information so that they are empowered, informed, able to do their jobs better. Not so. They want software that produces, with no effort on their part, something that Looks Nice.

Programmers and users: truly, these lands are many miles apart.