Tech Notes

► *by **Scott Johnson**, director of Angus Information Management Software*

There's no such thing as a computer expert

Every now and then, the Angus Information Management Software (AIMS) support staff and I get questions or hear statements that remind us that there is no such thing as a computer expert. The world of computers is just too complex for any one person to know everything. So, we've collected a few of the questions that new computer users may have.

Why are floppies not floppy?

This was the question that started the idea for this column. Someone made the comment that they copied a file to their "3.5-inch (in.) hard disk." After we referred to it as a "floppy" they asked the question — how can it be a floppy if it doesn't bend?

Actually, that's a very good question. Some of the first floppy disks to be invented were 8 in. in diameter. The actual storage medium was a silicon-based disk that was encased in a protective sleeve. The sleeve and the internal disk were flexible enough to bend, hence the label "floppy." Then came 5.25-in. floppies, which were the same type of arrangement and still floppy.

The confusion started when they began making 3.5-in. disks, which were permanently enclosed with a hard plastic external cover. Although these disks have the same internal media as before, the external cover is now stiff enough that they really aren't floppy. However, the name has stuck.

So what's a hard disk?

Computers do, however, have a hard disk. It's built into the computer, so you never see it. The hard disk is truly hard, which makes it capable of storing much more than any floppy. It's located in a dust-tight container. These disks are more like the old vinyl record albums that we had before compact discs (CDs). Modern advances have made them much smaller, but they hold vastly more data, and we can access it much faster.

What's a window?

Have you wondered where the name "Windows" came from? Apple's Macintosh (Mac) invented the concept. In the personal computer (PC) world before Windows, there were just disk operating system (DOS)-based programs. With DOS, there was just one screen to view at a time, and only one program could be running at a time.

In the Windows environment, multiple programs can run at the same time, each in its own window. As computers became faster and more sophisticated, they were able to "multitask" these different program windows.

So, each window is a program. Often, each program can open several of its own windows. There is always *only* one active window, but you can switch to any other window simply by clicking on something in that window. And if you can't see the window you want, you can minimize the current window(s) until you get to the one you want.

Better yet, Windows 95 (and subsequent versions) introduced the task bar, which is usually at the bottom of the screen. This is the same bar where the Start button is located. Each program that is running is represented by a button with an icon and text to indicate the program. Click on one of those buttons, and that program is brought to the top of the pile and becomes the active window.

Back to AIMS

Because of this window concept, it's perfectly legal to start more than one program at a time. You can start AIMS, then start your e-mail program without closing AIMS, and then switch back to AIMS by clicking on its icon, which is located to the right of the Start button. That will save you time getting back and forth when you are exporting files and e-mailing them.

Next, you're saying, "but if my e-mail program is running, I can't see the icon to start AIMS." There are two more ways to start AIMS without closing the e-mail program. First, you can minimize the e-mail window (see the next paragraph). Second, you can always get to your programs by clicking on Start, Programs and then the program group you want to open.

How do you minimize, maximize?

In the upper right corner of most windows, there are three icons. The far right one is familiar since it's often how you close the window (if it's the main window for your program, it will close the entire program).

If the window has been maximized, the middle icon will show two tiny overlapping windows, which means Restore. In other words, "restore the window to its partial-screen size before I maximized it." If it's not maximized, the middle icon is one little window. Click it, and the window will maximize to full-screen.

Finally, the left icon is used to minimize the window. The dark bar at the bottom of that icon represents how a minimized window "collapses" to its button on the Start bar.

As a general rule, I recommend plenty of curiosity; just try them. Also, if you just put your cursor over the icon, it will usually show you a pop-up help tip.

What's a title bar?

The top bar of the window (where those three icons are) is called the "title bar" of the window. Get it? It's the title of what's going on in that window.

If you click the left mouse button in that title bar, hold the button down and move the mouse, the window will move. Release the button, and the window will stay where you moved it. This is called "click and drag."

You can also click and drag each border to make it larger or smaller. Watch the cursor change shape as you slowly move over the edge of the window. Be sure to try it on the corners.

One last fast one ...

Why is there an a: drive (the 3.5-in. floppy) and a c: drive (the hard disk), but no b: drive? Well, the very first computers had one floppy (a:). That eventually wasn't enough, so they added a second floppy (b:). Finally, hard disks showed up as c:, but then two floppies weren't really necessary, so they dropped the b: drive. Of course the final irony is that the compact disc-read only memory (CD-ROM) drive is usually d:.

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