

**Spotlight:** The most important component in any system is the user. In business, this fact is increasing true as the direct cost of people has increased. The proliferation of personal computers (PCs) over mini/mainframe computers is due less to the asset's cost and more to the PC's configurability. With the introduction of the PC, the user was, for the first time, an integral part of the system and the system's reason for being was to serve the intellect and intention of the user, rather than the other way around. With control over the tool, people are more effective and therefore less costly.

The computer is a tool and as with all tools, it extends or expands the native capabilities of its user. A computer allows people to transcend their limitations in dealing with the vast quantities of information necessary to operate a business. Tabulating figures, coordinating the movement of inventory, and day-to-day communications are all facilitated through the usefulness of the computer.

For most of its history, the usefulness of the computer has far out paced its usability. Even today with PCs, the user must in most cases, bend to accommodate the restrictions of the computer rather than the computer being shaped to the user. This is significant because there is a loss of effectiveness when people bend to fit machines and with that loss of effectiveness, goes an increase in the cost of business.

The source of the problem is the mistaken assumption that "what" is done is more important than "how" that activity is performed. When results matter more than anything else does, any means, no matter how inelegant or ugly, is justified by the ends. This is true of all tools and the PCs pervasiveness makes its faults so evident.

Good design recognises that every tool has a handle. The handle connects the intention of the user to the functionality of the tool. It joins with each, and so, they become one. Good handles not only connect the user to the tool, they disappear. That is, they mate so seamlessly that the user does not given a second thought to the activity. If you must think about how you are holding a hammer, the result will be sore thumbs and bent nails, not a properly assembled house.

It is the tool's handle that must "fit" the user. The tool itself is strictly concerned with functionality. Separating the handle from the tool extends the tool's effectiveness to many users when through attaching different handles. The most obvious example of this in conjunction with PCs is the mouse and keyboard. The wide variety of these devices allows each user to choose the style that best suits their needs.

The choice of handles available in the hardware of PCs is sorely lacking in the software applications. Were it not for the adaptive ness and inventiveness of users, the PC would probably have been a fad like the hula-hoop. That PC applications have evolved sufficiently, it is now time for users to stop accommodating the lack of usability. It is only through demanding intuitive, flexible, and modifiable handles that the PC will realise its full potential as a business tool. The functionality of the tool and the effectiveness of the user are being limited by the lack of good handles.

**Musings:** The saying "Fits like a glove" has always puzzled me. Finding a well fitting glove—a baseball glove, work gloves, or winter mittens—has always required a great effort. Not only is it challenging to find the right glove, but also in most cases, the glove must then be shaped to the hand. Once the fit is established, ones attention turns to preserving the glove so that the efforts expending in the fitting are not required in the near future.

Once the effort is exerted, a well fitting glove is very satisfying. The genesis of the saying may be rooted in working to join two desperate items, a hand and a glove, into one seamless entity. Succeeding in dissolving the boundaries does yield a joy worth savouring. Even with the intention to join things together, it takes more than simple intention to achieve the desired result.

**Facts & Figures:** While most U.S. companies use performance plans as a tool to motivate employees, they are not likely to check if the plans actually help the bottom line. Of 129 major U.S. companies surveyed, 66 per cent said they used performance plans to determine pay increases, and 47 per cent use them to dole out bonuses. The survey also showed that companies track the plans' success inadequately and 30 per cent of the companies did not measure program success at all.

**Links:** Macally, [www.macally.com](http://www.macally.com), has for thirty years developed products that provide users with an effortless and pleasant interface with their PCs. As simple as a mouse and a keyboard may be, they make more difference to your experience of a computer than the fastest CPU.

**Quote:** Bill Gates may have had more to do with the evolution of the PC than any other person. So what does he think about his creation?

*"I think it's fair to say that personal computers have become the most empowering tool we've ever created. They're tools of communication, they're tools of creativity, and they can be shaped by their user."*