

Advancements Help Industry to Stay Ahead

The use of software has enabled appraisal offices to go 'paperless' and become more efficient.

BY DONALD J. MARTIN, CRP, RAA, GAA

Approximately 15 years ago, appraisal software companies and large appraisal organizations told us that a paperless society was on the horizon. Most mid-size and larger appraisal firms with five or more appraisers in the office were beginning to purchase computers and appraisal software programs to prepare for that time.

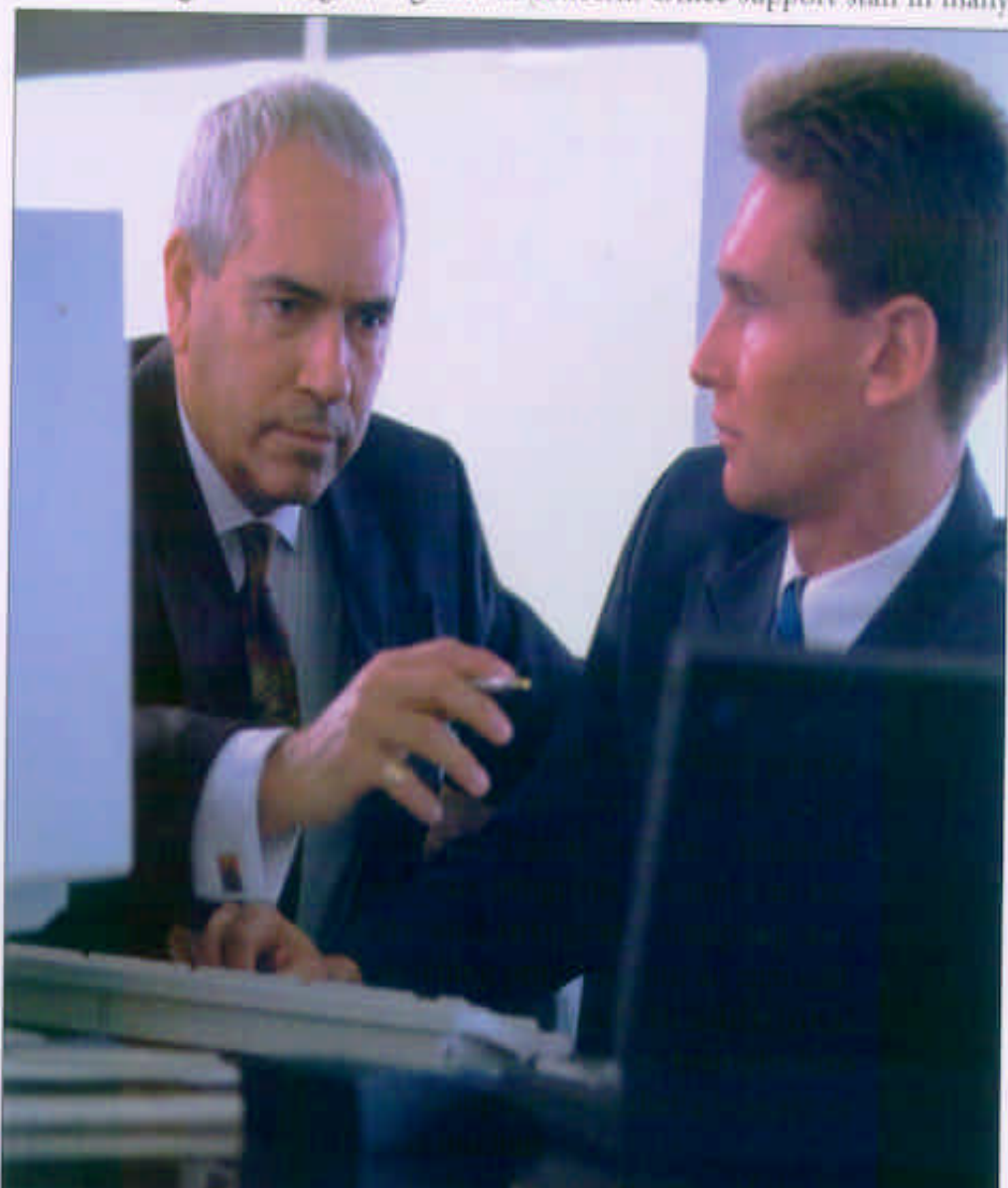
In the past 15 years, many developments have enhanced both the computers we use and the software needed to fulfill the needs of our clients, bringing us closer to a paperless office. We have gone from computers that do little more than word processing to computer programs that include digital signatures, color maps, and sketches of properties.

Soon, we will have 35mm photography images because of the capability of digital cameras. Appraisal software programs not only can create and integrate mapping and sketching programs into an appraisal, but also can pull in additional attachments that are brought into the computer by either a scanner or fax machine.

Today, the vast majority of the in-

dustry's appraisers not only use computers but also have the technology to transmit a report in its entirety to a client within a few minutes. Those reports can be sent directly to the client via the Internet or an intranet as an e-mail attachment.

The reasons the appraisal industry as well as other service providers supporting the relocation industry have changed their use of technology are relatively simple. Over the years the need to produce near error-free reports has grown dramatically. Retyping a report is no longer a significant concern. Office support staff in many



cases have been reduced. In the past, most appraisers had typists to do their reports; now, typists as support staff for appraisers are nearly nonexistent.

Also, appraisers need to produce multiple originals, which now can be done at the touch of a button. In addition, more and more clients required appraisers to use specific programs compatible with their systems. Appraisers were obliged to either use modern software or reduce market share. Appraisers also needed a quick turnaround for the reports. Now reports can be transmitted electronically almost instantly to the client, thus eliminating the need for a paper copy to be sent to a client by courier or mail. The promise of no paper, no courier cost, and near-instantaneous delivery was the last bit of bait needed to entice appraisers to use an electronic office.

Most regularly practicing appraisers now have the ability to have a paperless office, and many have had the ability for several years. But now, appraisers are watching and waiting

for the rest of us to catch up. Over the past several years, I have discussed this with many of my clients, and the basic response has been positive. When asked when it will be put into practice, however, I have received few solid answers.

In the past, the major problems with this technology have involved software compatibility issues. With current Y2K compliant technology such as that used by eRelay™, however, this is no longer a concern. Now, companies can update their software programs such that the files are standardized and can be interpreted by multiple appraisal software programs produced by different software providers (eRelay™ offers a certification program to validate that software companies conform to a standard that enables this exchange of files among various software programs for the *ERC Residential Appraisal Report* form.).

Most appraisal software programs in use today that are compatible with *Windows 95* and *Windows 98* and are

Y2K compliant also will be compatible with eRelay™.

Other problems involve the method and security of the file transfer and the need for trained staff to receive, print, and assemble each report.

Through the eRelay™ system or other electronic transmission involving the intranet and Internet, I am unaware of a single instance in which security has been breached during the transmission of appraisal reports.

As for staff issues, the amount of training is minimal in most cases. Staff often need no on-site training at all—only minimal assistance by phone during initial software setup and assistance in transmitting the first or first few appraisals (depending on the staff's comfort level). Most software providers are eager to help with software installation and technical support. Also, software is becoming more and more user-friendly.

The possibility of a paperless office is no longer on the horizon—it is here, and it is now. In the first quarter of this year alone the number of companies regularly conducting business with the appraisers in my office have at least doubled to 10 to 15 percent, and nearly 100 percent of appraisals produced by our office are transmitted electronically from many appraisers' home offices.

There has never been a better time for those who need appraisal reports to use the technology. The ease of use has never been easier; the speed has never been quicker; and the cost has never been lower.

Everyone seems to be in favor of a paperless office—to receive appraisal reports instantaneously on completion, to print as many copies as desired, and to archive reports long term electronically. Currently, most appraisers have these capabilities and are waiting for the rest of the relocation industry to catch up. ■

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