

Radio Days – 2012-08-04

Discussion – The Interface Is The Device

Firstly, what is the interface? The interface is the place where two dissimilar elements meet. An obvious example is where you meet the screen on your computer or your phone. You need to be able to tell your phone what you want done (eg, make a phone call) and the phone has to be able to tell you that the call is in progress or that there is no signal available. As the more intelligent of the two devices, you have to be able to decipher your phone's messages. An example of this message is the signal bars on your phone's screen.

The whole point of this article is to encourage you to check the interface which a computer, phone, camera or other electronic device presents to you when you use it. This interface can make your task of using your device easy or impossible: and the only way to find out which it will be is to use it for a while. If there is a trial version of a program I suggest that you try it out before making a large purchase. If you are thinking of buying a camera or phone I suggest that you try it out in the shop before you part with any money.

This was all prompted by an event which happened this week.

Changing an Invoice Layout

A client asked me to come round and help him modify the layout of his invoice. He was using MYOB and could not work out how to change his invoice to match his idea of how an invoice should look. I was just as lost as he was when I got to his office, so I rang MYOB's help line for inspiration. They told me that I had to load the latest update, Service Pack 4, for the version of MYOB which he was using.

Once this was done we could now start customising the invoice layout. Our first step was to select the invoice to be customised: and this was easier said than done. MYOB has three types of invoice: Service, Item and Professional. All of them come with a lot of junk attached: junk like a line which states that it was printed by MYOB. There is other junk, too: hangovers from the days of Sales Tax where various rates were levied depending on the type of manufactured goods involved. In these days of GST this is an anachronism which should be removed from the standard layouts.

With QuickBooks this sort of information is removed from an invoice just by clicking boxes on the selection screen. With MYOB you need to remove each item one at a time: this is an exhausting process and only reinforces my belief that QuickBooks is to be preferred over MYOB.

Another problem with the MYOB invoice customisation process is that there is no easy way to align various elements. They are supposed to snap to the grid but this does not happen. The program does not make it easy to align elements by hand as it only shows you the size when you have selected an item. There are two boxes which purport to show you how far down the page an element is and how far from the left hand side. These two boxes do not show the values for the currently-selected item: they show the values for the last-adjusted item.

This makes life much more difficult when you are trying to align a number of data or text boxes. For example, it looks more professional if the words *Invoice Number* and the number of the invoice are aligned horizontally. If there are related fields, like the words *Invoice Date* and the date of the invoice, which are located nearby, it is also more professional if they are also aligned with the other like fields. This is most difficult to do in the latest version of MYOB: it was much easier to align fields in the previous versions.

Talk about improving things worse!

Correcting a Bad Setup

Another instance where MYOB turned out to be badly designed occurred when I was still working there as a tech support person. A caller asked me to come to her office on a Saturday to correct an error caused by the local "expert" who had created her MYOB data file.

I went to her work place the following Saturday and worked out what the problem was. The problem was in the accounts which were used when creating invoicing items: these were set so that all *Cost of Goods Sold* were allocated to an income account. This had the effect of showing that she owed her customers more than her suppliers owed her.

It was easy to correct the setup errors and show her how to create her items in future. For her to correct all the errors in all the invoices which she had entered she would have to go through each invoice and make an adjustment. I estimated that it would take her some sixty hours of grinding monotony to correct the error in each invoice.

Later, when I had started working with QuickBooks, I realised that her problem could have been solved in a short time with the computer doing all the work. During that time her computer would have been doing the monotonous work and she could have done other work while QuickBooks completed the task of making the corrections.

This is another example of why the interface is so important.

Which Mobile Phone?

A friend had selected an excellent Android phone: one which had received numerous awards. After some weeks of using it she remarked that she wished that she had bought a iPhone. This surprised me, because I thought that my Android phone was the best when I bought it some years ago.

I was discussing my next phone purchase with a phone reseller when he remarked that he thought that the Android phones were excellent for people like me who like to fiddle and get the phone working just as I wanted it but that, for those people who just wanted a phone to work, the iPhone was the better choice. This surprised me because I find that the iPhone's interface too limited. I was reminded of a time, over twenty years ago, when I was teaching people how to use a database program called Lotus Approach. I really dislike this program so it was an effort to teach other people how to use it.

The reason for my dislike was that I felt that it had been made so simple to use that it was, in reality, far too difficult to actually achieve anything with it. I feel the same way about the iPhone because, in my opinion, it does not have the ease of use features that the Android phones have.

This, I suspect, is one of the best ways to start a religious war over which phone is better!

It also brings to mind my horror at my new phone some years ago. In the shop the phone looked good but, by the time I had got it home and started to learn how to use it I was ready to return it the following day. I resolved to go to bed and return the phone first thing in the morning.

Come the morning I had actually changed my mind, and I used that phone for some years with great affection. It was a flip phone and the only thing that I did not like about it for all that time was that I could not answer it with only one hand!

What a difference a night makes!

Further Information

Nothing this week.