Turn Your PC Into A Profit Center

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Turn Your PC Into A Profit Center

Even though personal computers have been around for several years, the market is still growing in many areas. With some imagination and initiative, you can join the thousands of entrepreneurs who are using computers to make money in such businesses as word processing, bookkeeping, desktop publishing, and computer training or sales.

Don't despair if you don't have a computer, or even if you don't know much about them. Today's computer equipment is relatively inexpensive, making computer-related businesses among the least expensive to start.

The software you can use as the basis of a business is generally easy to learn and use. With some software, you can go from novice to expert in just a few weeks, if you make an effort to learn and spend time practicing.

Here are eight ways you can profit from computers. Don't be afraid to adapt each idea to fit your preferences and the needs of the people in your area. In particular, you may want to incorporate several of these services into one business, possibly increasing your profit potential.

WORD PROCESSING

Typing reports, papers, dissertations, letters, and other documents for students, writers, and businesses is a common way to make money with a computer. Indeed, word processing is just a high-tech version of the old-fashioned typing service.

The difference is that word processing allows you to turn better-looking documents in less time than a typewriter. Further good word processing programs let you include headlines, footnotes, and special symbols in documents with little hassle. This flexibility increases the value of your service to potential clients.

College campuses are always good places to get customers for a word processing business. If you live near one, prepare attractive flyers to post on bulletin boards around campus. It may also pay to take out a small ad in the campus paper. Stress fast service, since students are notorious for waiting until the last minute to finish assigned papers.

If there is not a college nearby, try advertising in the classified section of the newspaper and mailing flyers to businesses. Small companies may be particularly good customers for word processing service because they may not have secretaries on staff. Larger

companies may use you for overflow work or for long projects in which the finished copy must be perfect.

Rates vary depending on where you live; check with other typists to see what they charge. It should be no problem in most places to get $1 per double-spaced page. Be sure to charge extra for footnotes, headlines, or other special formats, since these take more time to type.

DESKTOP PUBLISHING

Because its capabilities are so amazing and useful, this new technology promises to grow by leaps and bounds within the next several years. With desktop publishing software, and a laser printer to produce flyers, brochures, booklets, books and nearly any other material that needs to be designed and typeset. The documents that you produce are "camera-ready," meaning that they are ready to be printed up with no additional typesetting, layout or paste-up.

As a desktop publisher, you can offer both graphic design and typesetting services at a very competitive price (much lower than customers would pay for a separate graphic designer and typesetter). Even better, if you are a writer (or can associate with one) you can produce complete documents, from idea to finished piece.

Desktop publishing is one of the more expensive computer businesses to start. A good laser printer may run $2,000 or more, and desktop publishing software, including a full range of graphics and typestyles, may cost up to $1,000. If you're starting on a tight budget, you can probably put off buying the laser printer. Just work out an arrangement with a print shop or some other business that has a laser printer in which you may print out your finished documents.

Because desktop publishing is more involved than word processing, it's more difficult to set prices. The best way is to charge by the job, basing your fee on an hourly rate. When a potential client comes to you, estimate how many hours the work will take, and then quote a package price for the job. (Most customers prefer a package price to paying you an hourly rate, since they can budget in advance how much the project will cost.)

Businesses, charitable organizations, professional, and anyone else who needs high-quality printed pieces are potential customers for a desktop publishing business. Print shops don't offer graphic design and typesetting may be willing to steer clients who need these services to you. Direct mail solicitations also may be effective in promoting your services, especially if you include some impressive samples of what you do.

BOOKKEPING, TAX PREPARATION

Many business people love running their businesses but hate the financial record keeping necessary for smooth day-to-day operation. But failure to keep careful records can cause problems at tax time and whenever else a clear financial picture of the business is needed. If you have experience in bookkeeping or accounting, helping business people to keep their books can be an excellent way to make money with your computer.

With spread sheet software like Symphony or Lotus 1-2-3, you can keep detailed records of clients books, take care of billing, prepare balance sheets and financial reports, and keep the client aware of his or her financial standing. (Clients will really be impressed if you use graphic software like Harvard Graphics to prepare charts and graphs that show the financial status of their business.)

Base fees on the size of the business and the amount of time you need each month working with the client's books. You may want to charge additional fees for extra services such as preparing tax forms, financial statements, and balance sheets.

Small businesses--especially retail stores, with their need to keep inventory--are prime markets for a computerized bookkeeping service. The soft-sell approach works best when promoting this type of business. Clients want to feel that their finances are in the hands of someone who is conservative and trustworthy, not a pushy promoter.

COMPUTER CONSULTING

Most businesses can benefit from having one or more personal computers, but very few managers have the time to research fully the hardware and software available when making choices. If you know computers, you can provide a valuable service as a consultant, helping clients avoid costly and frustrating mistakes.

Consultants begin by taking the time to learn about a client's business. Thoroughly interview the manager or owner to find out what he or she expects a computer system to do. Observe employees to see what they do and how they might benefit from specific types of equipment or software.

When you've arrived at a recommendation, write a report and meet with your client to discuss it. After changes have been made to suit your customers, you can assist further by recommending low-cost sources of equipment, and setting up equipment once it is purchased.

Consultants typically charge per day. Even if this fee is over $100, emphasize to potential clients that your good advice can be worth many times what it costs, since you can suggest cost saving and efficiency-improving purchases.

COMPUTER TRAINING

Computer trainers teach people how to use specific types of equipment and software. For examples, when a company begins using a new word processing system, its employees must be taught to use it. A computer trainer conducts these training sessions, either one-on-one or with an entire group.

The most effective trainers are good listeners as well as talkers. Before training employees, ask them about other software packages they've used and what they intend to do with the new package. After all, there's no point in spending two hours telling someone how to do "mail-merge" with a word processor if they never have need for that feature.

Begin by specializing in only a few popular software packages that you know well. Prepare a mailer listing your areas of expertise.

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