

# Computer Corner

## Like a Boy Scout, Be Prepared and Use Your Computer to the Fullest Advantage

**A**s there have not been any recent letters to KRWA asking about computer software or hardware questions for the Computer Corner Feature in the KRWA magazine, Elmer Ronnebaum, General Manager of KRWA, made several good suggestions that we might

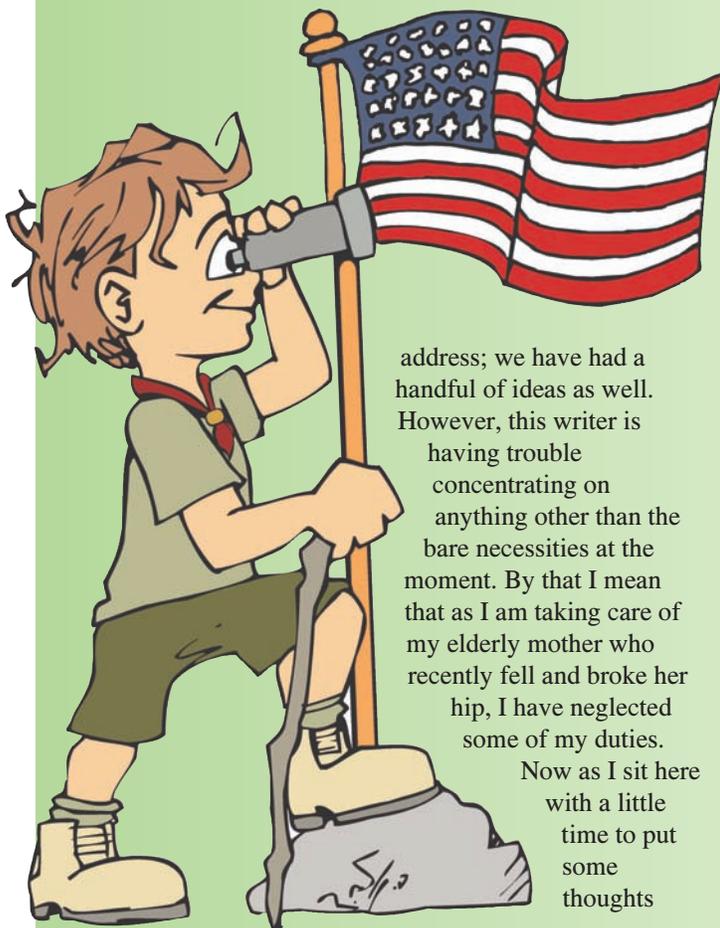
down for this article, the only thing on my mind related to computer work is the importance of the user performing his or her duties in such a way as to be prepared for life's little interruptions.

This interruption to my usual pile of work has stretched me considerably and forced others to fill in for me at times as best they could.

I keep thinking of my customer who I have helped through several problems of late. She runs the utility office for a rural water district that has always been self-read, meaning the customers submit their meter readings with their payment. The 500-member district is in the process of switching to an electronically-read metering system. This office manager is a very sharp lady but she has a habit of allowing her work to depend too heavily on what is in her head rather than using her software to its full capacity. Her computer can track virtually anything she would need to know about a customer but, except for the very basics, like meter readings, usage and payments, she doesn't bother to check boxes, fill in fields or type notes in the appropriate data fields in the billing software that would tag customers in special circumstances. She simply "knows" which customers' meters have been locked or pulled, which users are on a payment plan and not charged a late fee, which meters are inactive, which meters are allowed to pay only once a year and so on and so forth. All I can say is that her mother better not fall and break a hip!

For myself, I thank my lucky stars that I do tend to use many of the sort of features that cause my computer to keep track of things for me, however, given my recent experience, I too am examining how much more advantage I should be taking of the automation that is at my disposal.

If that plastic and metal box filled with printed circuit boards is treated like an employee that rarely misses a day of work, is a mathematical genius and remembers every



address; we have had a handful of ideas as well. However, this writer is having trouble concentrating on anything other than the bare necessities at the moment. By that I mean that as I am taking care of my elderly mother who recently fell and broke her hip, I have neglected some of my duties.

Now as I sit here with a little time to put some thoughts

single bit of information provided, then by all means, doesn't it make sense to keep that "employee" informed? By doing so, if you must miss work, whoever is trying to keep your seat warm can turn to the information at their fingertips and keep the office going in your absence.

In addition make sure your technical support contact information is available to aid any temporary worker. If a clear road map is available, not only are you less likely to return to a fiasco that you must then clean up but also the fill-in person will bless your name as he/she feels your presence in going about the daily tasks at hand. Otherwise, your name will come up, but it won't be with a blessing!

### Tracking what's important

To analyze how you might improve your computer record keeping, pretend you are the temporary person stepping into your shoes with little or no training or experience. Ask yourself how well you would do, walking into the office cold turkey. Ask yourself about special circumstance customers like little Mrs. Fairfax with the twelve cats who never gets the amount of payment quite right or sends the money in on time unless you give her a quick call, which you do. Will your temporary replacement cause Mrs. Fairfax to have a coronary when late charges show up on the next bill? Mr. Williams has an agreement with the board that as long as he keeps his current bill paid along with an extra fifty dollars toward paying off his old balance, he is fine. He may not have very nice things to say to your helper if he suddenly receives a shutoff notice even though he complied with the agreement. Then there are those final readings taken on the three meters that were switched out the day before your departure. The numbers were written on a sticky note that you would know must have fallen off the face of the monitor onto the floor, but you aren't there, your replacement just walked out the door with them stuck to her foot!

If you are such an old hand at the job, and so prone to take for granted all the information you have tucked up under your cap, or stashed in some drawer, then, after backing up your important data, ask a friend, board member, someone, to come into the office, sit down at the computer and observe their understanding as you pretend to be various customers asking questions about their accounts. Don't guide them to the information, just see how they would do if you weren't there.

**Not everyone has the luxury of working in an office where there are extra staff who can be cross-trained.**

Your billing software should provide various options and opportunities to track helpful information. If there is information you are filing away only in your own mind, or even writing down on paper and stashing it in a drawer or file cabinet, stop and think how much better it would be to be able to track everything about a customer in one

place – the customer information screen on the computer. Not only would it be more convenient, quicker and easier to look something up, but also, if regular backups are done and stored in a fireproof safe or at a different location, then even if the office were swept clean by burglars or the building burned down, the information could be retrieved from the backup.

It may be helpful to discuss the office's present processes with your support staff. If there are things you can think of you would like to be able to denote on the computer but you don't know where or the best way, then, by all means ask. Most technical support people are happy to direct you to features in their software that will help you in your work.

Not everyone has the luxury of working in an office where there are extra staff who can be cross-trained. Sometimes, the advantage of living in a small community is that you are surrounded by civic-minded people who take a special interest in service to the water district or town. In such a case you may be able to find a board or council member or other volunteer who would be willing to learn to fill in during emergency situations. They might even like to join in any official training offered by the software company, Kansas Rural Water Association, or others.

Everyone experiences downtimes in their lives sooner or later. While it may be impossible to make everything run as smoothly as usual, my advice is to utilize your computer's ability to provide needed information to those people who come to the rescue at such times to ensure that their time is as successful as possible. The Boy Scouts have the right idea – be prepared!

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