Founders Corner: “The Inmates Are Running The Asylum”
By Fred Ode, CEO/Chairman & Founder of Foundation Software, Inc.

In the exciting world of construction accounting software, the inmates are in control. Chaos reigns and some very ugly accounting software systems have infected the back offices of construction companies nationwide!

I learned the above lesson from a book I recently finished called “The Inmates Are Running The Asylum.” This book, by Alan Cooper, takes an in-depth look into software application design. The title is an analogy for “The Programmers Are Designing the Software.” To this analogy, I would like to add one more: “The Salespeople are Determining Product Direction.” Under either scenario, you have a company (asylum) allowing their inmates (programmers and salespeople) to produce software that is poorly designed from a user’s perspective.

In software development conventional wisdom says that if programmers have their way, the product will never be released. On the flip side, salespeople would have product releases every month highlighting hundreds of new features. I’ve personally seen a number of our competitors fall victim into one of these two traps. Let’s discuss an example of each.

The Programmers Are Running the Asylum
In the early to mid 1990s, one of our best-known competitors took several years to release a core module to their Windows accounting software suite. At the time, why they could not find a way to put closure on the development process was a mystery to me. In addition, their entire product suite had the reputation of being very cumbersome and difficult to work with. For example, offering AIA billing is standard in almost all construction accounting software. However, in this particular product, the entire process involves several complex and convoluted steps that even their own salespeople have difficulty performing. The programmers are clearly running the asylum.

Chalk One Up for the Salespeople
When designing FOUNDATION® for Windows®, Foundation Software was faced with a major decision. Do we completely redesign and rewrite our DOS product? This path would take several years and substantially more dollars.

The cheaper alternative was to retain a substantial portion of the old code, database and design. This approach, commonly referred to as an “overlay”, would result in getting the product quickly to market. Two of our competitors chose the “overlay” approach. Using old design methodologies, these “overlays” are feature rich and very shallow. They provide weak solutions to a multitude of everyday processes.

For example, both FOUNDATION for Windows and two of our competitors products have the “ability” to void a payroll check. However, when the check is from a previous period, the competition’s products require numerous journal entries, making the process extremely time consuming and error prone. Our competition chose features over usability. Chalk one up for the salespeople.

The #1 Accounting Software for Labor-Intensive Contractors.™
Who is Running the Asylum at Foundation Software?
As a completely redesigned system, FOUNDATION for Windows provides a clean, efficient and powerful alternative to any of our competitors. As a true Windows® product, it takes full advantage of current technology and software design. However, the question remains, which of the inmates are “running the asylum” at Foundation Software? The answer is none and all.

“ROPE” keeps the Inmates Under Control and Contractors Happy!
At Foundation Software we try to avoid inmate takeovers by first assigning a lead analyst to oversee design for each project. We then provide a design methodology to follow. This methodology can be best described using an acronym I coined called ROPE. ROPE stands for Research, Organize, Plan and Execute.

1. Research to gather information. This phase consists of consultation with Customers, Sales, Client Services, Quality Control, Programming and Management. Internet research, reading and analysis of our competition all come into play. Design considerations are not relevant at this stage.

2. Organize the research. Our lead analyst organizes information into logical components and processes. This may involve continued consultations with those people previously interviewed. Features are prioritized as well as added and eliminated based on the benefits they will provide to the end user.

3. Plan. The planning phase begins when our analyst designs the application from the user's perspective. Usability and the correct application of features and benefits dominate the process. Depending on the nature of the application, there may be one or more review meetings for clarifications and revisions.

4. Execute. Finally, the programmers that do the actual coding will receive the final specifications document. They will study the document and then meet with the analyst to thoroughly review all aspects of the specifications. Concerns, questions and suggestions will be made. There may be fine-tuning at this point then, programming begins.

Although the entire design process is time consuming and intense, it has three major benefits. First, it results in an application that specifically addresses the users’ wants and needs and does it in an extremely efficient manner. Second, it reduces the overall time it takes to release the application to the market. Finally, it stands the test of time.

Well-designed software provides a more powerful solution. It also allows itself to be continually enhanced while remaining clean, efficient and powerful. The inmates may not like this, but our construction clients sure do!

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About Foundation Software...
Since 1985, Foundation Software has assisted thousands of labor-intensive construction contractors with their accounting and financial software management needs. FOUNDATION® for Windows® is a 32-bit Windows® construction accounting system that uses the powerful Microsoft® SQL Server database and suits a wide range of construction trades. The base system software includes Job Costing, Payroll, General Ledger, Accounts Payable, Accounts Receivable and the Genie Series of built-in, custom report (patent pending), invoice and timecard designers. Additional modules are available. For information, visit online at www.foundationsoft.com or call (800) 246-0800.