

You've been training people for several months; in some cases, more than a year. But you wonder, "How much do they really know about what we've been teaching?" Paul Hoffman, who trains bus mechanics for the Spokane Transit Authority's 3½-year-old program, was never sure how much people learned. Certification was based solely on how long they participated in the program.

The need for adequate testing is a problem as old as education itself, but computers and new software have brought a solution. *Question Mark Designer for Windows*, from Presence Corp. in Stamford, Conn., allows you to automate the otherwise tedious process of creating, administering and marking examinations. For instance, Hoffman is using *Question Mark* to create tests that measure how much people have learned in the training programs. "We'll be truly assessing the competency of our technicians," he says.

WHAT IT DOES

For this review we looked at *Question Mark* running under Microsoft Windows, though there are also DOS and Macintosh versions. As with any Windows program, you double click on the program's icon to start. To

Test Questions Made Easy with *Question Mark*

create a test of your own, you click on another icon.

A Windows dialog box then allows you to control several settings for the test with a click of the mouse:

blanks, numeric answer, free-format text or multiple choice. Then you choose the form for that type of question; for example, a multiple-choice question might have options like "four choices, plain text" or "six choices, rich text."

Once you've made those selections, which become automatic after you've written a test or two, you

come to a screen for typing in the questions. Click the right mouse button, choose Edit, then type in a question, the right answer and the wrong answers. Behold, you've created a multiple-choice question. Repeat the process to create more questions.

WHAT WE LIKE

Creating tests should always have been so simple. In the past, it seems, creating tests was just too much hassle. People would postpone the task indefinitely, no matter how useful surveys, competency tests, marketing analyses and other tests might be.

Patti King, an instructional designer with Eastbridge Consulting Group in Avon, Conn., has helped a company design a test to measure the competency of its insurance agents in 13 areas of product knowledge and sales skills. How did the insurance company measure the

REVIEW

Question Mark Designer for Windows

Presence Corp.

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Product Use: Windows-based software for writing, administering and marketing tests electronically. Also useful for questionnaires, surveys and study guides.

Equipment Requirements: PC with a mouse, running Windows 3.1 or higher. 4 MB or more of memory recommended. The software works on all common networks that support Windows.

Release Date: October 1994.

Installed Base: 175 in North America.

List price: \$995.

Do you want to allow test takers to leave the test in the middle, or do they have to finish? Must they answer questions in the order presented, or can they skip around?

Once you have completed that box, you choose the type of question you want to create such as fill-in

skills before? "It didn't," King attests.

Hoffman, likewise, is convinced that "there is no other transit company in the United States" doing what Spokane Transit is doing with its testing. Some may be testing manually, but without the aid of the computer, testing is often overlooked altogether.

In addition, *Question Mark* offers distinct advantages over anything your fifth-grade teacher might have done with testing. Robert Adams, systems manager for Presence Corp., emphasizes the value of what he refers to as "item banking" and "branching." The first term means you can "bank," or store, a collection of as many as 500 questions. After the questions are banked, you can readily identify and use subsets of the questions, a technique called branching.

The rest is easy. As Hoffman explains it, "I can build tests in minutes by telling the computer to give me random questions from my selected libraries." The beauty of the system is that every test will be different. One test taker can't tell another one what to expect on the next day's test.

Another great advantage of computerized tests is that grading them is automated and nearly instantaneous. Instructors don't have to

carry a pile of tests around for days, trying to make time for grading, and they don't simply hand them back and forget about them, as in the pre-computer days. King's company uses the information accumulated in its tests to prepare a series of reports; one, for example, compares insurance agents' length of service with their performance.

Question Mark does more than simply automate what might otherwise be neglected; the automation is done well. The Windows interface makes the program's operation essentially "point and click." Hoffman found *Question Mark*'s Windows version much easier to use than the DOS-based programs he evaluated.

For those who want guidance as they proceed, *Question Mark* provides excellent documentation. The writing has a slight British flavor, reflecting the London headquarters of Presence Corp. Some of the spellings—like "randomise"—are British. But the language is what everyone wants in documentation—unpretentious and clear, as in the phrase "If you want to have two or more of the programs active at the same time, you . . . simply run them both."

Users rave about Presence Corp.'s excellent phone support, and it's

free. And at \$995, the pricing for *Question Mark* isn't outlandish.

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED

Useful as evaluations in various forms might be, companies have a way of procrastinating about them. You should realize that, even with a package like this available, your company may have a similar reluctance. Hoffman, for instance, has had to face the day-to-day realities of his job and allow development of the testing software to lag a little.

Also, you should plan to take some time to create the bank of questions you'll be using. "Data entry is really what it is," says King, who took about 30 hours to develop her bank of 300 questions for insurance agents. You also may want to allow for upfront planning, she advises. "If I had talked in advance with someone from Presence, I could have done a prettier job" of formatting the tests.

The way *Question Mark* uses the Windows interface is sleek and easy but—to this reviewer's eye, at least—just slightly quirky. However, Presence's Adams insists, with much justification, that people accustomed to the new *Windows 95* will find the interface completely natural because activity is initiated with the right mouse button.