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PRODUCT REVIEW
New Tricks for Old Dogs: FileMaker Pro 7

Reviewed by Jeffrey Allen

For many years, I have considered FileMaker Pro to be one of the best all-around database programs on the market. It started as a Macintosh program, expanded to the Windows platform, and then expanded its feature set and its market share. Several years ago FileMaker Pro achieved general recognition as an outstanding multiplatform database program. For a number of years I have included FileMaker Pro on my basic list of "must have" software for a law office operation. Virtually every law office has valuable uses for a general database program, and FileMaker Pro is well designed, reasonably priced, easy to learn, easy to use, and powerful.

Changes in Version 7

Through the years, the makers of FileMaker have worked to improve their program and have regularly issued new versions. Some of these "new" versions offered improvements without making major changes in the program, while other versions incorporated major changes or restructuring of the software. The newly released FileMaker Pro 7 qualifies as a major restructuring. FileMaker has redesigned its software using a newer and more streamlined relational architecture that opens the door to more powerful uses. For example:

• The new structure allows the user to store multiple tables within a single file.

• The relationships graph provides a map of the database and allows a user to change relationships by using a click-and-drag tool.

• Larger upper limits include text fields that can be up to 2 gigabytes long.

• Enhanced container fields can accept text or a wide variety of binary or multimedia files (including images, movies, audio, PDF, and Photoshop files containing data of up to 4 gigabytes each). Additionally, you can export container files.

• The use of multiple windows permits multiple data views.

• More streamlined file management allows a single file to contain an unlimited number of tables.

• New and improved security structure allows for User Accounts and Privilege sets.

FileMaker Pro 7 is compatible with multiple formats and platforms, including Mac OS X, Windows 2000 (Service Pack 4) and XP, Palm OS, Pocket PC, and the Internet (including the

capability of serving files to both Windows and Mac clients concurrently from FileMaker Pro or FileMaker Server running on either platform).

FileMaker Pro 7 retains and even enhances the traditional FileMaker Pro ease of use. The new version also improves upon the program's well-known flexibility. To help you hit the ground running, the program comes with 30 "templates," or pre-formatted database structures addressing common business, education, and home needs. Among the templates most likely to be useful in a law office are Expense Report, Document Library, Research Notes, To Do List, Contact Management, Asset Management, Inventory, Personnel Records, Task Management, Issue Tracking, Resource Scheduling, and Event Planning.

FileMaker also includes a Time-Billing template, but it will require modification to be useful for most law offices. Speaking of modification, if one of the templates is close to what you want but not quite there, you can easily copy and modify it to suit your needs. Creating a database from scratch is relatively easy as well.

FileMaker has been around for a long time. Previous users may well have already created the solutions that you require. FileMaker users groups collect and distribute database solutions. Additionally, a large number of qualified consultants have the expertise to assist you in locating an existing solution, modifying an existing solution, or creating a new solution to facilitate your work. You can get some of the available preexisting solutions free; others are for sale as supplemental programs to the FileMaker application. For a partial list of third-party FileMaker Pro-based applications (including a description of the application and contact information) see www.filemaker. com/products/third_party.html.

Because FileMaker Pro 7 uses a new file format for data, you must convert data files created in older formats to the new format to enable FileMaker Pro 7 to use them. To facilitate that process, FileMaker Pro 7 includes a built-in conversion tool that works with FileMaker 5/6 data and related structural information. The conversion tool moves the data, layouts, value lists, metadata, and scripts involved in the solution to the new format. Once converted, the application should run as it did before. The conversion tool works well with simple applications. If you use a complex application, however, you may find some glitches that will require manual modification.

Who Should Get FileMaker Pro 7?

If you do not have a general database program in your office, get one—you will find more and more uses for it. If you are going to get one, I recommend FileMaker Pro. If you have the hardware/software configuration it requires, get version 7. If not, consider upgrading the hardware and software, as it is out of date anyway. If you choose not to upgrade, then go out and pick up a copy of version 6 (it should be discounted heavily now). If you already have version 6 and have the required hardware and software to run version 7, you should seriously consider upgrading. But a word of warning: If you convert existing databases to version 7, check them out carefully to ensure that they work as they should before implementing them into your practice. If you have complex database structures that you will convert to version 7, consider hiring a FileMaker Pro certified consultant to do the conversion for you and assist you in verifying its operation.

FileMaker Pro 7 requires the following minimum system requirements: *Windows:*Pentium 300 MHZ or higher, 64 MB of RAM for Windows 2000 or 128 MB of RAM for Windows XP, CD-ROM, hard disk drive, and Windows 2000 (Service Pack 4) or Windows XP (Service Pack 1). *Mac OS:*Apple G3 or later (no G3 upgrade cards), 128 MB of RAM, CD ROM, hard disk drive, and Mac OS X 10.2.8 or later.

Note that using FileMaker Pro 7 results in a loss of support for older operating systems on both the Mac and Windows platforms; if you have not already upgraded to OS X (10.2.8 or higher) on the Mac platform or Windows 2000 or XP on the Windows side, this upgrade gives you one more reason to do that.

FileMaker Pro 7 will cost new users $299. Owners of earlier versions of FileMaker Pro can upgrade for $149. For more information, contact FileMaker or look at www.filemaker.com.

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