

Personal Information Management

ECCO: Your Life as an Outline

BY GREGG KEIZER

There's always one more way to skin a cat. Arabesque Software's ECCO Professional, a decidedly different personal information manager (PIM) for Microsoft Windows, takes an unusual approach to organizing the people, phone calls, appointments, meetings, and projects that crowd your days.

This \$395 program doesn't use a form-based database and Day-Timer-style calendar, as most PIMs do. Instead, it is built around outlines and adds powerful cross-referencing tools that make it look almost spreadsheet-like. The result is an original PIM that may remind you of two earlier attempts at the same kind of thing: Lotus Agenda and Symantec GrandView. ECCO is overwhelming at first, but it can conform to the way you work.

The outline-like interface is crucial to ECCO's power. Each name, each phone call, and each meeting is an item in an outline. Because they're discrete ob-

jects, not simply fields in a database, you can organize them and rearrange them at will by clicking and dragging, just as you do within a word processor's outliner. And since ECCO organizes these items into folders, you can create cross-referencing connections between people and notes or meetings and projects just as easily. Drag a task's outline into multiple folders, perhaps those labeled with your staff members' names, and the information appears in each person's individual folder. Change the information in any folder, and it changes everywhere.

This outline structure is bolstered by the addition of columns, which makes ECCO look somewhat like a spreadsheet. In the phone book, for instance, you can easily create a column named Call Back, that when clicked enters a check mark. Since the column is itself a folder, you can review all your call-back obligations just by dragging the folder into an outline window. Even more flexible is ECCO's ability to build ad hoc outline views based on combinations of folders. Drag the Done folder to an open outline, for example, and all your completed tasks appear. Drag and drop the Cost Estimate folder onto a column, and all completed projects are accompanied by a dollar figure. No other PIM can match ECCO when it comes to flexibility.

BUT IS IT EASY?

Such cross-referencing and outline-building skills will come slowly at first, if only because both the concept and its ECCO

implementation are foreign to PIMs. Arabesque was smart to include several templates with the package. These templates—specific to such areas as legal, research, project management, and time management—help you assimilate the program's features. Other aids include optional short-form menus that hide the program's advanced features, extensive on-line help, and ECCO's comprehensive documentation.

ECCO's calendar and phone book are immediately accessible, however. The phone book may show a form at the bottom of the screen, but it's actually an outline too. You can't add fields to that form, but you can add new columns to each name item to show such things as the last contact date or the result of the last phone call. The phone book dials numbers through a modem and times and logs calls. It also supports

to-do items as done. Since it's simply another outline, the calendar can be customized too; adding a name column designating who's handling what task takes just a few clicks of the mouse.

ECCO provides a slew of handy gadgets and high-powered features to oil the organizational tracks. Its Shooter, a one-step copy-and-paste tool, sends a selected item's text to other active Windows applications and documents and imports text directly into a variety of ECCO outline views. The toolbar is eminently customizable, and though group scheduling isn't implemented in this version, you can share outline views with others on the network. You can embed documents into an outline for fast retrieval, as well as launch applications directly from ECCO. Searches are fast, and a comprehensive filtering system with Boolean operators lets you selectively display information in any outline.

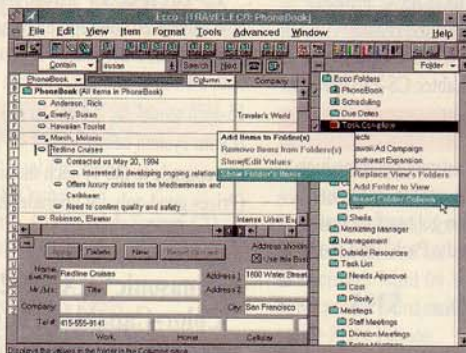
ECCO's flexibility is both its best and worst characteristic. Like Lotus's defunct Agenda, there's so much you can do with ECCO that it's easy to get lost in the choices, especially when they aren't evident. Even with the templates as a guide, expect a tough time digesting the program during your first few days. ECCO has a few

minor but irksome glitches: a dialer that takes three keystrokes, no direct fax support, and the necessity of multiple mouse clicks for seemingly simple tasks.

Even so, ECCO's tough to pass up, especially at its introductory price of \$99. This is a unique Windows application, one of the few PIMs that can truly mutate into a form that fits the way you work. □



From August 30 through September 3, you can go on-line to discuss ECCO with Gregg Keizer and Arabesque Software founders Pete Polash and Bob Perez. Type GO ZNT:EXEC from any CompuServe prompt.



OUTLINE VIEWS: ECCO's outline-based design makes it eminently customizable.

searches based on first name, last name, company name, or any of its standard columns.

The calendar is even slicker. It shows appointments and meetings in a list-like format, marking allocated time with colored bars. You can peruse commitments in day, week, or month views, drag name items from the phone book to create call or contact ticklers, set both simple and complicated alarms, and mark

FACT FILE

ECCO Professional, Version 1.0

Arabesque Software Inc., 2340 130th Ave. NE, Bellevue, WA 98005; 800-457-4243, 206-869-9600; fax, 206-885-0127

List price: \$395 (\$99 through September, 1993)

Requires: 2MB RAM (4MB recommended), 4MB hard disk space, Microsoft Windows 3.1

In short: ECCO is a one-of-a-kind PIM that relies on outline-style views, customizable columns, and organizing folders to display your day and data. It's the most flexible PIM on the market.

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