

: What is/was IFPS?

IFPS is an acronym for interactive financial planning system. My friend Paul Gray is an expert on financial planning systems and IFPS, and what I know about the program is based on his books and using the software that came with them.

The idea was to create a "language" that would "allow executives to build models without intermediaries (Gray, 1987, p. 3)". It was originally developed in the late 1970's by Gerald R. Wagner and his students. IFPS was initially marketed by Wagner's company, EXECUCOM Systems. By 1996, an extended product, Visual IFPS/PLUS, was distributed by Comshare, which purchased EXECUCOM. The last version I saw was Release 5.1. On the web, I found the software at <http://www.mis.cmich.edu/ifpsplus.htm>. I couldn't find any information at the Comshare website about IFPS and a number of people have told me that Comshare is not supporting and developing the product any longer.

One major advantage that a planning language has over a spreadsheet is that the model is written using natural language and the model can be separated from the data. For example, one can write the equation $\text{variable cost} = \text{quantity} * \text{unit cost}$. Planning languages led the way in providing "what if" and "goal-seeking" capabilities that have been included in spreadsheet programs. The command-oriented nature of this type of program limits its accessibility to executives and may be part of the reason that IFPS is no longer being developed.

Feedback on replacements for IFPS

Hubert Denault, who originally asked about a replacement for IFPS, wrote, "A few years ago, a colleague of mine attempted, with no real success, to convert the model into an Excel sheet, though I have to admit it was not Excel 2000."

"The problem with Excel is that the formulas are normally hidden and Excel does not segregate model and data. With such a large model, this can become pretty cumbersome especially when debugging. And, at some point, there is always some debugging!"

"With IFPS, the model file and the data file(s) are two distinct entities. A model is simply a text file containing all the rules written using a natural language."

"Though I might be wrong, I personally think the concept of separation of model and data, and the use of a natural language in a text file for the model, are very important."

Also, in response to the Ask Dan in Vol. 2, No. 1, John Walker wrote on January 11, 2001, "If you have some familiarity with Excel and Visual Basic I would recommend that you store your data in Access and do most of your modelling from there. Access is a much easier centre to work from if you are going to exchange information with other databases and Excel's Visual Basic seems to be particularly quirky."

"This doesn't mean that you need to abandon Excel as a calculation device, particularly if you are working with range functions. You can simply pour the data from an Access query into a spreadsheet, fill in the required calculation cells, and if you need to do so, read the calculated values back into Access for storage and later inclusion in reports etc. It's the same solution with a little more power and flexibility."

Thanks John for your suggestion and good luck, Hubert, with your project. If I get more feedback for replacements for IFPS, I will summarize them in a future Ask Dan.

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Check the following books for more details on IFPS:

Gray, P. Visual IFPS/PLUS for Business. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996.

Gray, P. Guide to IFPS/Personal. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1988.

Gray, P. Guide to IFPS (Interactive Financial Planning System). New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1987.

The above response is from Power, D., What is/was IFPS? DSS News, Vol. 2, No. 2, January 14, 2001.

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