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ENTERPRISE

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DUELING SURVEYS differ on how well firms fight the Y2K bug.

A year after a Wells Fargo Bank study found that most small businesses were oblivious to the so-called millennium threat, two newer studies find that many are still unprepared for the possibility that their computers, or those of their suppliers, will crash and cause chaos when Jan. 1 arrives.

The underlying problem, of course, is the inability of many old computers to distinguish dates in 2000 from those one century earlier. Sounding one of the latest alarms is the Institute of Management Consultants, a professional group based in Washington. After an April survey of 242 U.S. businesses, the group concluded that 20% still had "no plan to perform any comprehensive testing" for Y2K-related problems. All of the companies lacking such plans were small (with 500 or fewer employees). "Small companies are much less prepared than large ones, and much more intimidated by the issue," says Lynn Marie Hoopingarner, a West Hollywood, Calif., consultant who served as a senior editor of the report.

Moreover, a Wells Fargo update, release yesterday, finds that although about half

of all small employers now have begun fighting the Y2K bug, nearly 30% of small employers "plan to take no action at all."

But is the outlook really that gloomy? One software vendor, Sage Software in Irvine, Calif., a unit of Sage Group PLC of Britain, says it polled 200 small companies in April and found that some 93% had already fixed their computer systems or were working on fixes.