



Throwing Down the Year 2000 Gauntlet

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The year 2000 project is a large software project with a deadline that cannot be missed. Have we, as an industry, made a point of communicating the real risks that surround the delivery of the year 2000 project on time?

The year 2000 (Y2K) problem has many unique aspects, not the least of which is its size. So I think it is fair and useful to trim all those other aspects away and consider it as nothing but a *large project*. In other words, this is not a treatise on any of the technical issues associated with the year 2000. It is simply an observation about the information technology (IT) industry and how we have handled large projects in the past.

Many computer experts are loathe to dwell on the following observation about large projects, and certainly, we do not appear to be going out of our way to communicate it to the people (management) who must understand it.

“The computer industry has proven itself unreliable in the past when it comes to delivering projects on time.”

This is a kind and gracious way to state that when it comes to delivering projects on time, the IT industry must be considered an abysmal failure. To drive this point home, the following is a recap of an audience encounter I have repeated dozens of times worldwide over the past year.

Request to audience of IT professionals: “Raise your hand if you have a high degree of confidence in your ability to deliver the year 2000 project on time.”

Response from audience: A forest of hands raised in affirmation.

So far so good. This reflects what they are communicating to management: “Don’t worry, we have this under control. We can handle this; we’ll deliver it on time—trust us.”

Next request: “Raise your hand if, over the past three years, you have delivered 100 percent of your applications on time.”

Response: A gale of laughter. Why? Because the notion of 100 percent on-time delivery is as foreign to the IT industry as the notion that airlines can deliver 100 percent on-time departures.

Next request: “Raise your hand if your historical record of on-time delivery is 90 percent.”

Response: At best, one hand will be raised, only to be lowered quickly in submission to roaring laughter and catcalls of “Liar!” (The hand is lowered even more quickly if these catcalls are coming from users in the audience.)

Next request: “Raise your hand if your historical record of on-time delivery is 80 percent.”

Response: Two percent to 3 percent of audience might raise their hands.

Next request: “Raise your hand if your historical record of on-time delivery is 70 percent.”

Response: Another 2 percent to 5 percent of audience might raise their hands.

It is not until I get to between 50 percent and 60 percent on-time delivery that half the audience members have raised their hands, which means the historical track record for half the audience is below 50 percent on-time delivery. Instead of asking for a show of hands for each of these requests, I could instead just provide an industry figure: 86 percent of all applications are delivered either late or never.

But remember that when I asked if these same people had a high degree of confidence in their ability to deliver this Y2K project on time, they gleefully gestured “Yes!” This raises an ironic question of intense interest to management: Why are we so confident about our ability to succeed in the future when we have failed so miserably in the past?

A Gamble

I then ask the audience if there are any gamblers in the room. I ask them if they would like to play a little gambling game with me. I explain that a gamble has three components: the ante, the event, and the payoff. I ask them if they would put \$1,000 of their money in my left hand (the ante). I will flip a coin (the event). If it is heads, I will give them back their \$1,000; otherwise, I will keep their \$1,000 (the payoff). The response is naturally another gale of laughter. It is a sucker’s bet.

I then point out we are all already playing the game, except the stakes are higher—much higher. The ante is your organization. The event is your proven ability, not your wishful thinking, to deliver large projects on time. The payoff is the ability of your organization to function in the year 2000.

The Gauntlet Is Dropped

So here is the gauntlet being dropped at our feet: Have we, as an industry, made a point of communicating the real risks that surround our delivery of the Y2K project on time? Or are we trying to placate management? “Don’t worry; be happy. Everything is all right. No need for alarm?”

We have done it before—many times. The following report from the Sept. 16, 1997 *New York Times* concerns the cancellation of a \$100 million IT project that should have been delivered in September 1997.

“Until a few months ago, Medicare officials were consistently upbeat in their public statements about the new computer system and brushed aside the skepticism expressed by the Congressional Auditors.”

One could point out this was not a Y2K project, but does that matter? They are all big projects, and surely they obey the laws of large projects.

Surely, they are all affected by Murphy's Law to the same degree.

To be sure, the Y2K project *is* different—it has a deadline we cannot miss. But I do not know if a “real” deadline, one that cannot be adjusted regardless of the size of the task, will increase or decrease the likelihood of success. I suspect it will decrease our chances; we will see.

Are you being consistently upbeat to a fault? Are you guilty of communicating that all is well when you know otherwise? If you had to answer the requests posed in this article before an audience, I doubt you could not worry about your past success rate. So pick up a pen—IT workers should write down

their organization's proven historical track record for delivering projects on time. Then, you can face up to the following questions:

- Have you communicated your organization's success rate to management?
- Do they understand the risk the organization is undertaking?
- Do they understand the consequences of failure? Do you? ♦

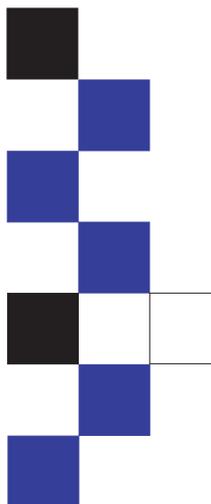
About the Author



Peter de Jager has been active in bringing the Y2K problem to the awareness of both the information systems community and the business world at large.

He is perceived by many to be the world leader in creating awareness for the Y2K computer crisis. He has written numerous articles on the subject, including the ground-breaking “Doomsday 2000” article published in *Computerworld*, Sept. 6, 1993. He has presented the Y2K problem to technical and general audiences in Canada, United States, England, Holland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and South Africa. A Canadian citizen, he was summoned before the U.S. House of Representatives Science Subcommittee hearings to testify on the Y2K crisis. He acts as a special adviser to the United Kingdom Year 2000 task force and was recently appointed as special adviser to the Russian task force. He also is a contributing editor to *CIO Canada* and a management columnist for *Information Canada*. In January 1997, he began writing the monthly Y2K column in *Datamation* and is a contributing editor to that magazine. He created the Year 2000 Information Center, which has more than 180,000 home page accesses on the site each month.

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