



Short-Term Fixes Shade Future

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I recently asked an elderly gentleman if he had heard of the year 2000 (Y2K) problem that will soon impact many computer systems. He said he had not. After I briefly explained the Y2K problem, he emphatically stated, "Ours is a generation of abbreviations, and we are always in a hurry."

I realized how right he was when I headed to work the next day. On the radio, the announcers were talking about baseball's AL and NL MVPs, whether the current lockout would KO the NBA, and the impact it would have on the NFL and NHL. I went in the office and powered up my PC's CPU so I could check my E-mail to see if an author had received my fax about an article that discussed the ROIs associated with COTS. As I booted, I glanced at a fed IT magazine that discussed the FY99 DoD authorization bill (HR-3616) and a legal battle between AT&T and GSA. I looked in my day planner and saw notes on getting X-mas cards and the date of our next CEB. In the tech world, we talk

about SEPGs doing CBA IPIs and SCEs and pushing SPI throughout the whole org. My business card says I work at the STSC at Hill AFB, UT.

Is it any wonder that we software developers brought this problem on ourselves? We even refer to the year 2000 problem as the Y2K bug, just to save a few characters. We need not look down on computer programmers in the '60s and '70s (sorry: 1960s and 1970s) for trying to save space in systems that were hard pressed for memory allocation. Who knows what shortsighted software decisions we're making today (including our Y2K renovation choices) that we will regret tomorrow?

It is worth noting that more than mainframe computers will have problems next year. For example, the world's consensus standard operating system, Windows, is not compliant. In "Time To Debunk Y2K Myths" (*Information Week*, Sept. 28, 1998, p. 172), Leon A. Kappelman states, "The name alone should alert us to the simple fact that *Windows 98 is not Y2K OK, either*. Windows 98 defaults to two-digit years just like Windows 95, and two-digit years

can lead to problems. In fact, all versions of Windows have date-processing problems. ... The same is true of practically every Microsoft product, including the newest versions."

Many questions remain as we approach January 2000. At this point, the question is not whether we can fix all the world's computers in time (we cannot) but whether we will finish renovating the most critical systems and fix them correctly. To make the right decisions, we need a clear idea of which systems need to be fixed and which can be left alone or left to die. Patricia McQuaid and Lee Fischman note in their article (page 11) that "One big mistake made in scoping Y2K renovation is assuming that all legacy software needs treatment."

As we hurry to renovate our systems, we cannot just work fast, but must work smart. When we get to January 2000, let us hope we have not made unwise renovation shortcuts, work-arounds, and other "abbreviations" that do not work, but put us deeper in the hole than we already are. The sacrifice of long-term needs for short-term savings is what put us in this mess in the first place. ♦

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