

The Folklore Factor

BY MIKE SUTTON

Anyone in the IS industry who isn't aware of the issues associated with the Year 2000 problem would probably be seriously challenged if asked to fog a mirror. However, with the deadline closing in on corporations of all sizes, many of us working to get our companies in shape for the big event don't appreciate how documentation — or the lack of it — could complicate the problem. Welcome to "Nightmare on Corporate Row."

When I got out of the U.S. Army in the early '70s, I bounced around doing various things: appliance repairman, metallurgical inspector, and structural steel construction. Finally, after a few years of outdoor work and much heavy lifting, it dawned on me that I could probably make more money with my mind than with my back.

Although I had approached my high school years as a social opportunity rather than an educational experience, I decided to go back to school to study electrical engineering. As I walked into class on the first day I set a goal: I was determined not to be the first in my class to flunk out!

During my first semester I took a chemistry class taught by the best teacher I've ever had: Dr. Robert Libby. After having worked several years in the industry Dr. Libby decided to become a teacher, so he brought much practical experience to the classroom.

I learned a lot about chemistry — long since forgotten with the exception of the mathematical definition of pH, which, for some reason, is stuck in my mind. However, Dr. Libby's most valuable and well remembered lesson was something that I never expected. He encouraged all of his students to document every step of any activity in the lab. His reasoning was simple: It's much easier to figure out where an experiment or project went wrong if you have the ability to re-examine every step of the process.

"It's not enough to know what you did. You should also understand why you took a given action," he would say repeatedly.

Over a decade later, while attending my first management training class, Dr. Libby's advice was reinforced. The watchword was "documentation," particularly in terms of personnel situations.

Now almost two-and-a-half decades after that chemistry class, as Washington Systems Consulting, Inc., is about to finish its fifth year in business, I find myself recording almost everything related to work.

The preceding sentence may conjure up an image of some recluse who collects string, tinfoil, and refrigerator mold, but let me assure you that I'm as abnormal as anyone. My reason for making copious notes is simple: No business can allow itself to be exposed by single-points-of-failure in any facet of operation whether it be manufacturing, service or personnel. If I get hit by a bus tomorrow, I don't want my partners standing around trying to figure out what course of action I took in a given situation, or why.

In today's IS world, there is generally a lot more work than there are people to do it. This is particularly true in light of the Y2K situation. There are many companies, more than a few of which are listed in the Fortune 500, for whom legacy systems are an integral, if not an indispensable part of their IS activities.

It's safe to say that in most cases, the people who wrote and maintained this software are long since gone, and so is the folklore associated with their work.

Of course, you don't have to wait until the end of a century for a lack of historical perspective to generate problems; all it takes is someone retiring, moving on to another company, or being down-sized for the folklore factor to rear its unpredictable head.

Here are a couple of other scenarios to keep in mind about folklore. First, there are people who believe that the more information they keep to themselves the more powerful they are. There's no doubt that those who possess critical information are generally in better bargaining positions than those without. Management has a responsibility to make sure these types of situations aren't allowed to develop.

Second, companies often make conscious decisions not take action to resolve a problem in an attempt to save the expense of doing so. This brings me to one of my favorite expressions: "It often costs money to save money." But, decision autopsies are rarely performed, especially at times when some critical deadline is lurking around the corner. More about business-decision post mortems next month.

Businesses today should learn this from the Y2K phenomenon: Foresight is generally more desirable than hindsight. Encouraging employees to keep good records of their activities can be very valuable, particularly with the volatility of today's work environment. As my Uncle Bobby Kennedy used to say: "The palest ink is stronger than the most powerful memory." **ts**



NaSPA member Mike Sutton's Vietnam novel, *No Survivors* (ISBN 0-8338-0226-7) is available from Marshall Jones Co. at (800) 258-1505. Mike is donating 33 percent of the royalties from his book to the Center for Homeless Veterans.

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