

Year 2000 is not an Earthquake

Conrad Weisert

Paul Mattes gave our February meeting a survey of the so-called “Year-2000 Crisis”, which has gotten wide publicity not only in the trade press, but also in popular media. His presentation was informative and entertaining, and for those who are facing this problem, helpful. But for many of us it was also frustrating and infuriating to hear about this appalling waste of hundreds of millions of dollars.

Where did these applications come from?

A 1975 application system designer might reasonably have chosen a 2-digit year representation, assuming at most a 15-20 year system life. In 1985, however, that choice had already become indefensible. By 1995 it was the height of irresponsibility.

According to Paul Mattes and others, however, many of the offending databases and programs were indeed developed within the past decade, and some are still being developed right now!

Someone is to blame

I’m puzzled by the surprisingly bland reactions of some of today’s managers who now have to pay these staggering bills and divert resources from urgently needed *new* applications. Do they view the crisis as a regrettable but *unavoidable* event, unconnected to any cause? Do they consider the millennium end an unexpected act of God?

A manager who discovers that a current or former staff member had planted a *time-bomb virus* in a critical application, will be furious and ready to pursue strong remedies. How is this any different?

I’m not suggesting that punishing the perpetrators would ease the crisis. I’m amazed, however, that organizations continue to take no notice or even to *reward* them with promotions and even lucrative consulting contracts to clean up their own mess.

Rewarding the innocent

Whether or not we go after the guilty, let’s give recognition to the organizations who are *not* facing this crisis and to the professionals and managers in them who acted responsibly.

Looking back 20 years we find some standards manuals calling for a sensible internal date representation corporate-wide. Where there was no standards manual we find some data administrators choosing sensible representations. Where there was no data administrator, we find some savvy analysts and designers doing the same for their application. Where the designers were naive, we find some responsible managers providing guidance.

That didn’t seem like a big deal at the time, but it now appears that those heroes saved their employers millions of dollars.