Y2K—ok?



YOUR AGE IS YOUR ATTITUDE

We suffer mixed emotions as we rush headlong toward the unavoidable deadline that is Y2K: weariness with the focus on the "crisis" and dread as to what might really go wrong.

Baby boomers are particularly apprehensive, and no wonder: their generation grew up when computers were at their most unreliable. The Y2K situation simply reinforces the distrust and suspicion that many have toward these devices.

The *Farmers Almanac* stated it best in 1978: To err is human, but to really foul things up requires a computer. This statement is probably the best definition yet of the relationship between baby boomers and the computer.

YESTERDAY

The fact is, Y2K isn't the first time that we have been challenged by the potential unreliability of computers. Almost from day one, they haven't performed as expected.

Flash back to the late 1960s, when big business was beginning to adopt computers with a vengeance. Credit card companies, utilities, department stores, government — there was an almost giddy rush to convert cumbersome paper-based systems to this wonderful new computer technology. Business believed it was entering a dramatic new era, one in which computers would solve all the day-to-day problems of processing vast volumes of paper-based information.

The results of these first forays into computer systems weren't pretty. Bills and monthly statements were sent out with obviously incorrect amounts. People found themselves being charged two or three times for the same purchase. Outrageously wrong bills, in the millions of dollars, began to appear in mailboxes — with computer-printed threats attached that promised dire consequences for non-payment.



These bizarre situations became common enough that publications such as *Newsweek* and *Time* began to report on them. In a September, 1969 article, "The Great Snafu," *Newsweek* noted the sense of "helpless frustration" across the land. In 1971, *Reader's Digest* ran an article entitled, "What to do if a computer fouls up your credit card account," full of practical hints and advice on how to deal with a computer billing system gone mad.

Throughout the late '60s and early '70s, newspapers often ran the photograph of a man or woman holding up a stack of paper, under a headline announcing yet another billing mistake that had landed the customer with a credit-card, hydro or telephone bill for several millions of dollars. (The person in the photo invariably had a bemused smile on his or her face.) As late as July, 1988, the *Toronto Star* wrote about a retired couple in Tampa who had received an electric bill for $5,062,599.57. They were advised, of course, that they could pay it off on the installment plan for just $62,582.27 a month.

Inevitably, a whole category of urban legend grew up around computers. In the 1960s, for example, the tale began to circulate of the woman who received a computerized bill for $0.00. Every month, she would receive a form letter suggesting she pay up and threatening unspecified consequences if she did not. It wasn't until

she wrote a cheque for zero dollars and zero cents and dutifully mailed it off that the computer decided to leave her alone.

True or not, the story rang true, especially for boomers who were convinced that computer systems were not to be trusted.

TODAY

Science fiction writer Douglas Adams, author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, once wrote: "The major difference between a thing that might go wrong and a thing that cannot possibly go wrong is that when a thing that cannot possibly go wrong goes wrong, it usually turns out to be impossible to get at and repair."

People trying to get companies to fix their computer billing errors would agree wholeheartedly.

And now here we are at the edge of the Y2K crisis! Trillions of dollars are being invested to solve a problem that should never have been allowed to happen in the first place.

How much damage will the Y2K bug really cause? My own view is that we'll have to live with a lot of mixed-up paperwork for some time to come, but there will not be a real crisis. But then, I grew up at the tail end of the baby boomer generation, and I have learned to overcome my instinctive distrust where computers are concerned.

It's a different situation for many full-fledged boomers. Having lived through the '60s and '70s, that generation tends to focus on the negative aspects of these machines and gloss over the fact that, overall, reliability of the technology has actually improved a great deal.

TOMORROW

What will it take for such attitudes to disappear? Quite simply, time — time for our children to grow up. Kids today seem to approach computers differently; they seem to know instinctively that things will go wrong as they explore them and learn to use them. When that happens, they simply turn off the power and start it again. Problems don't faze them.

This perception makes sense, given that they emerged on the scene when computers already had a long history behind them. This technology may have terrorized many of us in the past, but to them, it is simply a remarkable and largely reliable tool. ■

Jim Carroll, C.A., examines our wired world through speaking engagements, a weekly *Globe and Mail* column and his new book, *Y2K Planning for Canadians*. Reach him at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com.

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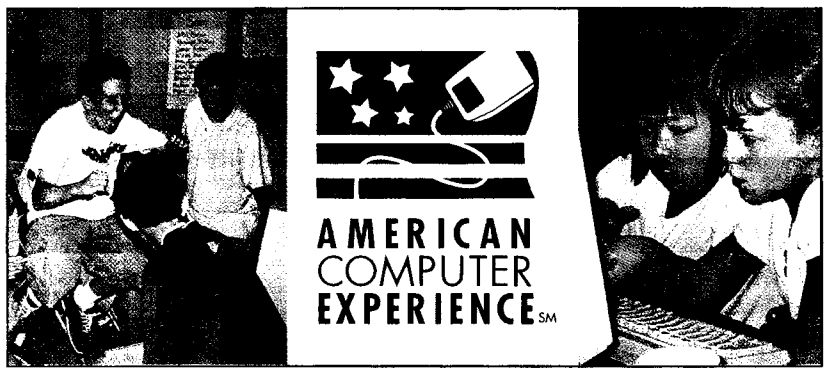

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