Goodbye and thanks for all the phish

The structure of IT Week is being re-organised a little and this will be my last comment article so thanks to all of you who have provided me feedback on my ramblings in the last 4 years. It happens to be article number 42 so there is a pleasing circularity about this.

Looking back over the articles, there are several recurrent themes. Although I am accustomed to systems being screwed up all the time and have spent a significant part of my research career in this area, the true scale of waste in recent years, particularly in government IT systems, is nothing short of a national scandal. I strongly suspect that the primary reason for this, (and it is most certainly not limited to government systems), is that one of the key characteristics of a senior politician or a manager is to be seen to be doing something important; to leave a legacy. Regrettably, vaulting ambition is the last thing you need in an IT system, wherein real success usually springs from innately conservative engineering, satisfying a relatively small number of easily understood requirements in a hopefully scaleable manner. Its not rocket science but this is exactly the opposite of what senior figures like. There are exceptions I hasten to add. Although I haven't looked into it in detail, the DVLA system now appears to work quite competently, but this is a relatively rare example. Reading that our new PM is technophobic does not fill me with any confidence that things will improve so I expect us to continue to waste 10-15 billion per year on this sort of idiocy. Its probably best just to consider it as a tax, let us call it a Very Asinine Tax, and therefore like death, inevitable.

Another theme which I have tackled on several occasions is that of human computer interfaces to the many systems which increasingly invade and determine our lives. I cannot possibly say this in strong enough terms but the general quality of these is awful. Interface designers seem incapable of separating necessary from unnecessary complexity. Windows has of course been a famous role model for this but it can only get worse. Parsimony has become an IT crime. Apple try hard but many other attempts are crippled in a way which the late and very lamented Douglas Adams foresaw 20 years ago. I'm trained to understand the mathematics of quantum mechanics but can't turn a modern car radio off – maybe somebody wanting to turn it off never occurred to the designer.

A final theme is the growing skills gap. I have been warning about this since the very beginning. The problem has grown and grown and once again this year university applications are down. All I can say here is that if any captain of industry is complaining about the skills crisis, they are at least partly responsible for causing it in the first place with short-term ostrich management techniques, poor career structures and generally poor pay. It is not about to improve. Whatever education ministers might tell you, levels of numeracy and literacy are significantly worse in recent years.

My writing continues to appear on www.leshatton.org and I cordially invite you to browse it but for now, so long and thanks for all the phish.

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