

Trouble with help lines

In this article, I was going to write about the experiences of dumping Windows for Linux some 5 years ago in the company I work in, (an entirely fruitful and surprisingly painless experience by the way), but I became distracted after a so far profoundly unsuccessful attempt to change my daughter's O2 phone tariff and decided to write about this instead as an example of eccentric systems design.

I had previously tried to change the tariff in February and nothing had happened so I decided to try again. I mentally prepared myself and rang up the O2 help line 08605-860860. From this point on, things rapidly spiralled off into the surreal.

First of all, I got a voice uncannily like Jude in the BBC series "the Doctors". After entering the mobile number, Jude chatted away and after pressing more buttons happily for a few minutes and listening to a sound track which sounded eerily like the sound effects from the Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy, I was directed to an option which would allow tariff changes. Eventually a young woman came on the line and first of all took the number again. No, don't ask why. She then informed me that she would have to transfer me to Jupiter because it only took 3 days there whereas if she did it, it would take 30 days. Slightly light-headed but nevertheless impressed by O2's outsourcing capabilities to take in other major gas giants, I was stupid enough to ask why. The young woman patiently explained that O2 had thousands of customers. Gibbering quietly, I decided to cut and run at this point. She kindly gave me a number to dial which would take me straight to Jupiter. Reassuringly, it gave an unobtainable number.

Pausing only to bite the handset, its back to 08605-860860, enter my phone number AGAIN and another few minutes of the lovely Jude. More buttons and this time, following a slightly different version of Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy, another young woman came on the phone, and asked me for my number AGAIN. She had a satisfyingly complete record of how O2 had failed to do it the first time but no explanation. This time she promised that all would be done according to my requirements so I asked for a reference number for the request. The young lady pointed out patiently that there was no such thing but it had been entered into the computer and would therefore be done. When I pointed out that it hadn't been done the first time, she said that it shall be done and no, I would not receive a reference number but yes, they would know that they hadn't done it just like the first time they knew they hadn't done it but hadn't done it anyway. To reassure me, they would call back. They haven't.

I won't single out O2 for particular opprobrium - this is a distressingly common feature of many modern systems. As a system grows in complexity, it becomes increasingly disorganised and inter-system communication degrades. I hope to write further on this issue but for now, I will only note that we are going to have to think very carefully about major systems design in the future to avoid their degeneration into incomprehensibility.

L.Hatton@kent.ac.uk