

Bases of Knowledge: Plumbing the infinite with a toothpick

It's been a bad week for Anglo-Saxons. First having incarcerated us in the inflexible and largely unexplored depths of the Data Protection Act and now proceeding boldly forth on the introduction of computer enabled ID systems, the Government has to confess that it has lost 25 million tax records containing bank details because some div sent them through the post as it was "too expensive to extract the subset of data required by the Inland Revenue". Clearly they have never heard of report generation then. Second, our hapless footballers demonstrate the traditional skills of highly overpaid and underworked tradesmen in an industry wallowing in its own financial incompetence and get knocked out by a better team, working hard, playing well and determined to win. Of course the Anglo-Saxon media blame it on the coach rather than the players who were almost completely disinterested. Which brings me to professionalism.

A debate on professionalism in IT has started on the British Computer Society web-site under the guise of assembling a 'Base of Knowledge'. I may be being a little hard on this but this debate seems almost entirely focused on business skills, and includes for example, a discussion of whether 'gravitas' is of value in a senior IT engineer or not. Leaving aside the notion of a 'business skill' for a moment, it is almost as if we have forgotten that it takes great technical skill and experience to build a good system. Instead we are exhorted to "engage the stakeholders" and "continually push to accountability and openness" and other vacuities rather than "how are we actually going to build this, why and who for?". It just serves to illustrate a point I try to make with engineers that the human race could no longer build a pyramid because we couldn't decide what colour it should be.

So as a contribution to the great debate and an illustration that professionalism starts at the top with an important role model, may I introduce you to Microsoft's attempts to break (and I do mean break) into the automotive software arena with Microsoft Sync technology.

From http://online.wsj.com/article_print/SB119516486649794799.html Sigh.

"... Sync is both a hands-free, Bluetooth-based phone system and a voice-activated music player that's compatible with iPods and plenty of other media devices. It's a neat idea, but the software is buggy and the interface is inconsistent. The most annoying problem during my week of testing was that the car kept switching on the Bluetooth music function of my cellphone, even after I had turned it off. Sync also had a problem finding some of the music on my iPod nano. Ford said that if the song, artist, album and genre data tags for a song are not all filled in, Sync will ignore the track, but even Ford's chief engineer for Sync couldn't explain why the system could play the same files from my iPod Shuffle.

The irony of all ironies is that I was entirely unable to call my main public-relations contact at Ford using Sync because the voice-recognition system couldn't parse his two-syllable name, no matter how I said it. It seems that Ford has bought into the common software industry practice of beta-testing new technology on early adopters.

Ford maintains that Sync's software has the potential to be updated, and engineers are already busy working on version 2.0 of the system ..."

I stopped reading at this point. What they need is some gravitas. I wonder if you can get it at HomeBase ?