

KGB REPORT

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A Curmudgeon's Look at Business and Technology

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Written by Kevin G. Barks

That Thing You Do: Procedure manuals are generally associated with the inflexible methodologies of big business, but even a one-person enterprise can benefit from a detailed written explanation of the daily office routine. Say you're out of town and you need someone at home to fire up your computer and locate a piece of valuable information. Trying to explain the process over the telephone can be time-consuming, costly and vascular accident inducing. It's a lot easier to direct your remote helper to step through a written checklist. Or say your work environment, like mine, resembles that of a detonated Office Depot. You want to call in a temp to help you dig out, but you dread having to take time out of your schedule to explain how things are done. Point your assistant to your procedures book, answer a few trivial questions, and you're on to your profit-making endeavors. This isn't a one-day project, of course. Get yourself a stack of index cards and briefly list everything you do during your daily routine as you do them. For example: boot up computer; update voice mail message; check email; check fax machine; scan newspapers; etc. As time permits, write a complete description of each function on the card. In the case of booting up the computer, you might write: 1. Remove any diskettes from drive; 2. Turn on monitor (power switch on front bottom right side); 3. Turn on computer (large button beneath drive). Don't be too concerned about neatness; just be certain *you* can read the cards. The next day, follow the instructions on the card and see if you need to add or change anything (2a. Remove cat from keyboard, check for hairballs.) Once a procedure is complete, type it into a word processor, print it out, three-hole punch it and stick it in a bright red binder. In a month or two you'll have a pretty decent procedures manual. Just remember to put it in an easily seen, accessible location.

Telecommuter Battleship: Thanks to the wonders of computer technology, you can now goof off with your co-workers without the need for them to be in an adjoining cubicle. Hasbro Interactive has released "em@il games", electronic mail versions of chess, Scrabble®, Battleship® and other traditional time wasters. The toy company promotes the software as "email people actually want to get", but notes that "security systems may prevent play over some corporate networks".

Clueless? Do you ever wonder if restrictions on the use of computers and cellular telephones are based on what constitutes good public relations rather than hard science? I recently visited a medical office building that had signs posted everywhere prohibiting the use of cell phones inside the structure. But outside, right at the front door, about a half dozen people were simultaneously talking on their cell phones, generating enough concentrated electromagnetic radiation to punch a hole through the deflectors of the Death Star. And that old Pepsi machine in the lobby? When the refrigeration unit on that sucker kicks in, it puts out an EM pulse that changes the channels of all the televisions in the building. Wonder what it does to the fella with his head stuck in the business end of an MRI? The same deal applies to the air travel: why is ok to use your laptop on one airline, but a safety risk on another? No wonder the public is wary of technology experts. I'm taking no chances: I follow the example of one of James Thurber's relatives and spend my spare time inserting plugs into vacant power receptacles to prevent the excess electricity from leaking out.

Good Java: Speaking of scientific/medical flip-flops, a ten year long study of 46,000 men revealed their risk of developing gallstones was reduced by about 40 percent by drinking two or three cups of coffee a day, so go ahead and have that extra cup before you get to your desk in the morning. The benefit is specific to coffee; tea, Mountain Dew and other caffeinated beverages don't seem to offer

the same protection. As usual, the scientists don't really understand the mechanism involved. They think it may alter the characteristics of bile and/or flush out the gallbladder. Maybe not worrying about getting gallstones will reduce your blood pressure and lower your anxiety level, the other previously reported results of guzzling coffee. And don't overlook the calming effect of spending so much extra time in the restroom.

Lo-Tech Advantage: Do you hang up the phone when you call someone and get his or her voice mail or answering machine? You can be certain that your clients do that to you, too. Why not try a telephone answering service? It's been my experience that callers respond better to a live operator than a recording; they seem less likely to hang up on a person than a machine. When I'm just out of the office for a few minutes, I let the phone switch to voice mail. But if I'm going to be gone for an extended period of time, I forward calls to the answering service and give the operator my itinerary. A human operator is still unsurpassed in filtering out the junk but making certain vital calls get through, no matter where you may be hiding. Of course, that's assuming you get an answering service staffed with sentient beings. Some firms have personnel who'd come in second place to a dial tone in an IQ test. Check with several companies, ask for references, and try them during "rush hour" - 8 to 9 am, lunchtime, and dinnertime.

False Security: Hot weather means power problems, with mini-blackouts and brownouts hitting just about everyone. Don't think you're safe because you have an uninterruptible power supply (UPS) on your system. In the past 15 years I've experienced two major computer hardware failures, and in both instances the blame could be laid on malfunctioning UPS units. Like smoke detectors, the biggest cause of UPS problems is weak or dead batteries. Most UPS batteries need to be replaced every two years. I make it a habit to check my UPS batteries whenever I clean out the mateless socks in my underwear drawer. You may wish to select an occasion of similar personal importance.

Looking Good: Even those of us who primarily work at home need to venture into real business offices from time to time, and such excursions demand appropriate attire. Clothes shopping can be a time-consuming experience. It can also be emotionally draining, especially when one has the physique of Jabba the Hut. For years, every suit coat I ever purchased had that annoying bubble between the shoulder blades, an aesthetic defect that resisted the Herculean efforts of even the most skilled tailors. Some tactfully inquired if I had an actual physical affliction, to which I'd respond, "I'm not a real Modo, I'm only a quasi-Modo." I grew tired of explaining the joke as well as watching clothes salesmen actually leap behind counters to conceal themselves as I approached. So, I responded enthusiastically when I received a cold sales call from Tom James, a company that specializes in selling custom-cut suits and shirts and performs the fittings in the comfort and convenience of your home or office. My salesman braved an early Saturday morning snowstorm to fit me for the first suits and shirts that actually looked good on me. The price is a bit lower than custom suits from downtown upscale clothiers, and you can wear your Marvin the Martian boxer shorts during the fittings with only the customary amount of embarrassment.

Printer Danger: Networked printers are security risks, especially if they're connected via the TCP/IP protocol to computers that are linked to the Internet. A hacker accessed a printer at the Space and Naval Systems Warfare Center in San Diego, reconfigured the routing tables on other equipment, redirected a file being sent to the printer to a server in Russia, and then sent the file back to the printer. The intrusion was found only because an operator became suspicious when the job took an unusually long time to print.

Congressional Comment: "When buying and selling are controlled by legislation, the first things to be bought and sold are legislators."-P.J. O'Rourke

Good Moves: Perhaps it was time for these folks to move on. *The Wall Street Journal* cites a survey listing some interesting reasons for bailing out of executive positions, including "starting a worm farm", "had a vision and was told to resign", "had to go to jail", "to study Spanish in Brazil" (especially odd, since Portuguese is Brazil's official language) and "there was a demon residing in our computer network." Hey, we're all familiar with that last one.

School's Out: NRI Schools, the 85 year old correspondence/home study/distance education institution, stopped accepting new enrollments on April 1 and will close its doors when its final students finish their courses, probably in spring 2002. Founded as the National Radio Institute, NRI enrolled over 1.5 million students during its existence and had graduates in virtually all of the country's top companies. Like building a Heathkit, taking an NRI course was a rite of passage for many technical hobbyists. The McGraw-Hill Companies decided to close NRI for the same reason it sold off and effectively killed *Byte* magazine and shut down its technical book club: to concentrate on its core business, which is, apparently, the ultimate destruction of those entities that had a positive influence on my life.

Works for me: It's been my experience the evening is a lot more relaxed when I pick up my wife after work with the family dog in the back seat of the car and a chocolate flurry with chocolate ice cream and Oreos in the front cup holder. Much more effective than the gold chains and the thong, and it doesn't scare her co-workers. Or the dog.

Quotes of the week:

"The reputation of a lifetime may be determined by the conduct of one hour."-Japanese proverb

"If you want to truly understand something, try to change it."-Kurt Lewis

"Mothers are fonder than fathers of their children because they are more certain they are their own."-Aristotle

"You know things are rough when you take the batteries out of the smoke alarm to put in your beeper."-Unknown

Trivia: "Make it so," Captain Piccard's favorite command, is from the classic *Horatio Hornblower*. The line was suggested by Robert Justman, first-season producer of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and a producer on the original series. Coincidentally, Horatio Hornblower was the character upon which *Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry said he modeled Captain James T. Kirk. This week's question: actor Rock Stevens starred in *Muscle Beach Party*, *Hercules and the Tyrants of Babylon* and *Goliath at the Conquest of Damascus* before reclaiming his real name and achieving his greatest success in a 60s TV series. Who's the actor, and what's the show? No fair looking in the Internet Movie Database. First correct guesser wins a Y2K-compliant KGB pop-up desk calendar.

Size Does Matter: Scientists who just got around to studying the brain of genius Albert Einstein (he died 44 years ago; what the heck else have they been doing?) discovered that while relatively mundane in appearance, it does have structural differences from the brains of humans with normal intelligence. Specifically, the inferior parietal region, the portion believed to process mathematics and abstract thought, is 15% larger on both sides than normal brains. Also, the sulcus, a groove which extends from the front to the back of typical brains, is partially absent in Einstein's. The lack of the indentation might mean more of Einstein's neurons were able to establish connections with each other and function more efficiently. This somewhat supports Dilbert creator Scott Adams' assertion that "We're a planet of nearly six billion ninnies living in a civilization that was designed by a few thousand amazingly smart deviants." How did the researchers get Einstein's brain? According to the Associated Press dispatch, from scientist Thomas Harvey, a pathologist working at a small hospital in Princeton, NJ. When Einstein died in 1955 at the age of 76, Harvey "performed the autopsy, determined Einstein died of natural causes and took the brain home with him." *Took the brain home with him?* Along with some paper clips, notepads and other assorted office supplies? One assumes Harvey's wife learned early in their marriage not to open old Tom's briefcase after the daily commute. We can only hope rock star Tommy Lee is somewhere other than the Princeton area when he meets his eventual demise, lest he be relieved of a different though equally legendary body part.

Useless Web Site of the Week: <http://www.kiddkiss.com/recall/bellybutton.htm>. Ostensibly a collection of products useful for eliminating bellybutton odor, it's also an entertaining multi-media display of classic television commercials dealing with household and personal cleaning products.

Final Frontier: This isn't a *Star Trek* fanzine, really, but we'd be remiss if we didn't note with sadness the passing of actor DeForest Kelley, 79, who played the curmudgeonly Dr. Leonard "Bones" McCoy on the timeless series. Originally approached for the role of the alien Mr. Spock, Kelley was instead cast as the ship's chief medical officer, described by series creator Gene Roddenberry as "a future-day H.L. Mencken". An unabashed cynic of technology, the McCoy character was a self-described old fashioned country doctor who put more faith in humanity than high technology. In a 1982 interview with author Allan Asherman, Kelley said McCoy represented "the perspective of the audience, that if you were along on the voyage you'd think, "These people are crazy! How in the hell do they expect to do that?" Indeed, the McCoy character was often used to interject a dose of reality, cut through the technobabble and explain the frequently convoluted plotting of the more arcane *Trek* adventures to the great unwashed. His summary of the story of *Star Trek IV*, delivered in exasperated disbelief to the gung-ho Captain Kirk, still stands as one of the best character-delivered examples of exposition in modern screenwriting history: "You're proposing that we go backwards in time, find humpbacked whales, then bring them forward in time, drop 'em off, and hope to hell they tell this probe what to go do with itself?!" The entire plot in fewer than 35 words. That's Bones for you. The son of a Baptist minister, the Atlanta-born Jackson DeForest Kelley wanted to be a doctor like an uncle he greatly admired, but his family couldn't afford to send him to medical school. He instead became a character actor who worked steadily in film and television throughout the 50s and 60s. The typecasting of *Star Trek* essentially ended his career, but he considered himself fortunate to be associated with a role that made him a permanent icon in popular culture. The interview ended with a quote that could serve as an accurate and fitting epitaph: "I'd wanted to be a physician and couldn't - and yet became the most well-known doctor in the galaxy."

Y2K-A-Rama

Calm Before The Storm: There wasn't much in the way of Y2K news last week; everyone's too busy getting ready for the start of fiscal year 2000 on July 1 to issue weighty pronouncements to the press. Why worry about Y2K when routine daily computer disasters grab the headlines, anyway? Online auction house eBay experienced a series of major failures associated with a software upgrade to their Sun servers. The company's market value dropped by billions and the firm refunded about \$5 million in fees while promising better service in the future. The nasty email-borne explorer.zip Trojan horse is still wreaking havoc on Microsoft-based operating systems, using the same application programming interface weakness the Melissa virus exploited. Interestingly, the virus is written in Delphi, a Pascal-like language used by "old" programmers. The fact the bug deletes source code files written in the C and C++ languages makes some think this virus was aimed at other virus writers. The author's use of Delphi gives the authorities some hints about his identity, but it appears this guy is a pro: the file had no other identifying characteristics. The alleged author of the Melissa virus distributed his email bomb apparently unaware his name was embedded in the file thanks to the then-secret Microsoft encrypted id feature. Then there's the Internet "security" company, irked because Microsoft didn't respond immediately to its discovery of a security hole in the giant firm's Internet server software. It posted instructions detailing how to take control of e-commerce web sites. Microsoft issued a temporary patch, promised a permanent fix, and blasted eEye, the security firm that publicized the weakness. Finally, efforts by NASA and Russia to move the new international space station out of the way of a piece of hurtling space junk failed when the station's onboard computer rejected an incorrectly phrased maneuvering command. Luckily, the junk missed the station by about four miles anyway. This is the second time in three months the station's computer has ignored bad commands issued by ground controllers. Those guys ought to read the manual. Remember, Y2K is just another day...

No Holiday, Veto Threat: The Clinton administration says the Feds will observe the New Year's holiday on December 31 as originally planned, rejecting recommendations by some to move the day off to January 3 to give government agencies more time to resolve Y2K issues. The White House has also threatened to veto a bill approved by the Senate and returned to the House of Representatives limiting Y2K liability lawsuits. The Feds also reported 40 government systems won't complete Y2K remediation efforts until December, including those that process food stamps and Medicaid.

Post Y2K--Update Your Resume? Businesses using outside contractors to assist with their Y2K remediation efforts seem to like the idea of per-project, temporary workers. Columnist Jim Seymour claims in *PC Magazine* that many companies will cut salaried staff in favor of consultants in the coming year. Assuming all that Y2K stuff really works, of course.

FDA Seizures: The Food and Drug Administration may seize certain medical devices it considers dangerous because of Y2K problems. The agency has a preliminary list of about 70 "computer controlled potentially high risk devices" whose manufacturers have not proven Y2K compliance. The devices include powered emergency ventilators, infusion pumps, glucose test systems, fetal cardiac monitors and radiation therapy simulation systems. Note that only specific devices from specific makers are affected, not entire equipment categories. Right. The only piece of medical equipment I'll permit near me on 1/1/00 is a tongue depressor.

You Asked For It: The print version of *KGB Report* is now both literally and figuratively one-sided. Some readers requested we only use one side of the sheet so they can scribble notes on the back. We suspect it may also be a subversive method of supplying binder refill pages but, as Cleopatra was reputed to have said, "I am not prone to argue." Remember you can get *KGB Report* in Adobe .pdf format via email, if you prefer.

The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ Now Available! Nobody knows what the dickens is really going to occur on Y2KDay, but the odds are about a million to one that anything bad will happen to you personally. You say that's not good enough, bunkie? Step right up, here's the answer to your problem! Through the miracle of modern mathematics, you can virtually eliminate the chance of any Y2K calamity visiting upon your person by purchasing and wearing The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™. It works by exploiting the elegant if little understood concept of statistical probability. Now here's the deal... The odds of getting personally zapped by a Y2K bug, according to various generally reputable mass media sources, are, as we previously noted, about a million to one. But the odds of getting zapped... while wearing The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™... are virtually incalculable! Do the math yourself! See what we mean? In order for The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ to maintain its statistical validity, it's necessary to restrict the seeded universe (the number we sell) to... wait a minute... carry the two... say, 100,000. At a mere 20 bucks, it's the best insurance you can buy! Each beanie is unique, hand-modified to further increase the odds against personal catastrophic happenstance! No two are alike! Beware of inferior, mass-produced Y2K Remediation Headgear™... those duplicate beanies may save you a few bucks, but do you dare tamper with the delicate mathematical balance of our pristine calculations? Don't muck around with celestial mechanics, my friends! Accept only The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™! Plus, it'll be a great way to break the ice at that New Year's Party! The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ is more attractive than a lampshade, not to mention far more functional! Order The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ now, save your butt, beat the odds, and make a timely fashion statement! Call KGB Consulting at 412-854-2550, fax us at 412-854-4707, or email us at kgb@kgb.com. Act now! Visa and MasterCard accepted! Quantities will be strictly limited to the number we can sell, so hurry!

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