

# KGB REPORT

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*A Curmudgeon's Look at Business and Technology.*

*Featuring the Stuff You Really Need To Know*

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**The Big Computer Scam.** The evidence has been in front of our noses for years, but we've refused to accept it. Maybe a closer examination of the statistics released recently by the International Labor Organization will open some eyes. The ILO reported that in 1997 Americans worked more hours than any of their foreign industrial counterparts and led the world in productivity. But a closer examination of the figures reveal that in the period from 1980 to 1996, US productivity rose only 22%, while Japan clocked a 43% productivity increase and Thailand reported a dizzying 141%. What happened in the United States between 1980 and 1996 to cause such a huge discrepancy? The integration of the personal computer into almost all aspects of business, that's what.

Rather than increasing efficiency, personal computers frequently consumed human resources in proportions that, in many cases, far exceeded the benefits returned. Computers have automated and improved some business functions. They're also primarily responsible for the creation of entirely new services and markets that require the constant development of even more powerful and complex systems. The problem is the expansion is proceeding too fast.

Computer technology is at the same point in its development that steamship technology was when the *Titanic* was launched. It's state of the art, extremely attractive and supposedly safe. But just as the *Titanic* had hundreds of manual laborers toiling mightily below decks to maintain its operation and provide the illusion of stability, many businesses have scores of technicians working long hours, shoveling code instead of coal to keep their systems staggering along.

Do I exaggerate the woeful state of computer software "engineering"? I wish.

A survey of businesses by the Massachusetts research firm Standish Group International revealed only 26% of information technology projects are completed successfully. A whopping 46% are either finished behind schedule, exceed original budgeted costs, or are missing key features specified in the original designs. An unbelievable 28% are declared outright failures and are abandoned.

Substitute the words "office buildings" for "information technology projects" in the preceding paragraph, and you'll see how absurd the situation actually is. How long would it take for the Feds to

put some serious hurt on the contracting industry if 28 out of every 100 buildings built had to be abandoned during construction or condemned upon completion?

Businesses have forsaken stable operating systems and hardware architectures for low cost consumer-oriented designs that can and do collapse under the weight of the tasks to which they're assigned. Ironically, the companies pushing the new technologies frequently depend on the systems they've displaced to get their inferior goods to market. Microsoft can't use its own operating systems to run its most frequently visited Internet web sites; its products fail miserably under the load. Yet Microsoft has no problem marketing NT and the upcoming Windows 2000 as "enterprise" systems upon which you can comfortably bet your company.

And how about Intel? Its Pentium processors are the most popular central processing units on the planet. But "ancient" Digital VAX computers running the VMS operating system, an architecture originally designed in the late 1970s, control the fabrication plants that produce the chips. Don't even suggest to Intel that it migrate its fab plants to Pentium-based systems running Unix variants or Windows NT.

It's just a matter of time before some corporate *Titanic* will make the tragic turn to inferior systems and crash into a technological iceberg. Maybe at that point the bean counters will realize the actual cost of running a computer system far exceeds the price of its hardware and software. Maybe they'll recall those days of Digital and IBM "proprietary" systems that ran for months or years without failing. Maybe they'll quit buying systems that suffer frequent idiosyncratic crashes and require multiple daily reboots. Maybe they'll say, "You're not going to get another penny from us until you give us the same stability and reliability we had with our mini and mainframe computers in the 1970s."

Nah. There's too much money invested in current systems. The other guy will hit the 'berg, not us. Now pardon us while we rearrange our deck chairs...

**Kicking The Habit:** When 74 year old graphic designer Ed Bedno's computer died and spent a week in the repair shop, he made a startling discovery: he got a lot of work done. The Philadelphia man realized his computer was an enormous time sink and that others might be similarly addicted. So, with the help of his programmer son, he created "Getalife", a utility that will shut down a computer for a predetermined period and will issue a stream of insults if attempts are made to bypass it. The goal of the program is "to encourage temporary abstinence from the life-sucking machine". The \$20 program is available at <http://visionary2000.com/getalife>.

## Y2K-A-Rama

**Survive Y2K? How About Surviving Until Y2K?** At least we know what the Y2K problem is and when it will arrive. Unfortunately, unexpected crises that emphasize the infrastructure's fragility whack our technology dependent society almost daily. Some recent events that blindsided us:

**Amway Fizzles:** Quixtar, Amway's big push into web commerce, bombed big time when its new web site collapsed on its first day of operation under the load of 20 million hits. The failure angered thousands of "Independent Business Operators" who had spent \$99 each for the right to participate in the multilevel marketing operation.

**Privacy Questions:** Vice President Al Gore and Sen. John McCain are the only presidential candidates whose web sites have privacy statements prominently displayed. Some observers feel those without privacy guarantees may be collecting visitor information for fund raising or other campaign-related activities. Is everything a conspiracy? As Napoleon observed, "Never ascribe to malice that which is adequately explained by incompetence."

**Bank Targets:** About 2,500 financial institutions in eight countries were infected with a Microsoft Word-based macro virus recently. Antivirus vendor Network Associates says the "Thursday" virus is set to detonate on December 13, when it will erase the contents of the c: drives of infected machines. The rapid spread of the bug is blamed on end of month financial reports shared by banks.

Fixes are available from various vendors. Some reports claim over 1,000 Word-type viruses are introduced on a monthly basis, but only a few survive in the "wild".

**Pooped Out:** The AVweb *AVflash* newsletter reported a Virgin Express pilot had such a bad case of lower gastrointestinal distress that it caused him to taxi his Boeing 737 erratically, making flight attendants stumble during the in-flight safety drill. The pilot returned to the terminal, where a fit pilot replaced him. The airline accepted the pilot's resignation after he admitted he should have seen a doctor before getting onto the plane. In an oddly related-yet-unrelated story, *AVflash* reported the Canadian Air Force will have to spend millions of dollars to repair corrosion damage on its Lockheed C-130 Hercules aircraft caused by male crewmen who routinely miss the target while using the planes' lavatories. Switch to decaf, guys.

**200K Viruses for Y2K?** *InfoWorld* quotes a Symantec researcher who claims there could be as many as 200,000 viruses set to go off on or near Y2Kday. A Network Associates marketer mentioned in the same piece that hackers on Usenet are currently discussing methods to "hose" systems in ways that mimic actual Y2K damages or malfunctions. Add more chaos to the situation with the annual barrage of holiday junk and chain e-mail that clogs systems, and it begins to sound like computer folks are switching into high-level CYA mode. All that money you spent on Y2K remediation and the system still dies on January 1? Gee, must be one of those 200,000 pesky Y2K viruses. If you do the math, it means one out of every 1,300 US residents is going to write a virus between now and the end of the year. Next time, guys, pick a more realistic number. 200 viruses are possible and scary. 200,000 are way over the top. Or maybe the *InfoWorld* report meant 200,000 virus incidents, which is still rather high but not totally out of the question.

**Trivia:** Answer to our last question: San Francisco has 156 *heating* degree-days in August. This week's question: what sitcom character's telephone number was 555-CHER?

#### **Quotes of the Week:**

"Kids. You can't live with them, you can't shove 'em back in the womb."-Piper Laurie (as a caller on *Frasier*)

"I've always been a big supporter of the constitutional right of the people to peaceably assemble and petition government for redress of grievances. It's just that I never envisioned it taking the form of thousands of people screaming, "You \*\*\*hole, you \*\*\*hole," at me."-Lowell Weicker

"Some days even wearing my lucky rocket ship underwear doesn't help."-Calvin and Hobbes

"It was the day after Jean-Paul Sartre died."-Woody Allen, recalling under oath the day in 1980 he first met Mia Farrow.

"I hope they get leprosy."-Humorist Dave Barry's response to a request for a comment on the success of young Internet millionaires.

"Who the hell are you supposed to be, Captain Video?"-KGB's sedated mom to her masked obstetrician, 9/11/54.

The *KGB Random Quotations Generator* has about 3,300 entries and is frequently updated. Visit it online at <http://www.kgb.com/cgi-bin/kgbquote.cgi>, and be sure to try the online search. Many of the quotes are also available on our Curmudgeon Tees... check out <http://www.kgb.com/tshirts.html>.

**Useless Web Sites of the Week:** <http://www.useless-facts.com/> is, indeed, a truly useless web site containing all sorts of trivia that's difficult to check. So, what the heck, relax and learn Pittsburgh is the only city where all the major sports teams have the same team colors (black and gold); there are 22 stars in the Paramount Pictures logo; the names of the two stone lions in front of the New York Public Library are Patience and Fortitude; the concrete in the Hoover Dam will not be completely cured for another 500 years; and the little hole in the sink that lets the water drain out, instead of flowing over the side, is called a porcelator.

**Goodbye, Short-Term Memory:** I turned 45 last Saturday the 11th which means that, according to recent scientific studies, my brain is now full. I can't shove anything new into my short-term memory

unless I forget something else. I think I'll begin by forgetting my birthday. That way I can erase my neurological references to Harry Connick, Jr., Brian De Palma, Lola Falana, Earl Holliman, Hedy Lamarr, Kristy McNichol, O. Henry, D.H. Lawrence and Ferdinand Marcos, who share my date of birth. It'll be tough to let go of the significant historical events linked to September 11, though: the discovery of Manhattan by Henry Hudson in 1609, the final airing of *Lost in Space* on CBS in 1968 and, my favorite, the premier of the ABC series *Get Christy Love!* in 1974.

**KGB in the News:** We discussed the 9/9/99 non-event with P.J. Maloney during the 6:30 am "LiveLine" segment on *KQV Newsradio* and were quoted in a *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* article on the subject.

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**They're Here!** As seen on *ABC World News Now*, the KGB Consulting Y2K Compliant Multi-Dimensional Tetradecagon Pop-Up Calendar is now available! Check out our *Desperate Sideline Enterprises* web page at <http://www.kgb.com/tshirts.html>, which also features our Curmudgeon Tees, now with new lower prices.

**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 e-mail us at [kgb@kgb.com](mailto: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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