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Commentary

Y2K planning: Is it all just fantasy?

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THE DREADED Y2K problem could be a worst case or it could be a huge dud. It's hard to tell. We'd better hope it's a dud because nobody really knows what a worst case would look like, and it's hard to prepare for something you can't predict.

We expect cranks to predict doom and gloom. But serious people who have been dealing with the problem for several years acknowledge at least the following: The Third World is impossibly behind, without any hope of making much progress. Literally billions and billions of lines of computer code in mission-critical systems around the world haven't been fixed. The U.S. government is ahead of most of the world's governments, but even many of its agencies haven't completed Y2K assessments. Even if an individual company is Y2K compliant, it still won't be safe because its suppliers and customers may not be compliant.

Besides, there's no standard for what compliant means: One person's compliance is another person's complacency.

Because of ambiguity in definitions of compliance, and because we don't know what a real worst case is, many Y2K compliance statements and a lot of Y2K contingency plans are fantasy documents. Fantasy documents are based on best-case

assumptions, and overstate how much safety they can deliver. For example, in 1989, in Alaska, the oil industry's contingency plan promised an effective response to an oil spill larger than the one from the Exxon Valdez. It was a fantasy — there has never been a success story for a gigantic oil spill. One important problem with fantasy documents is that they can lead to a false sense of security, setting the stage for a crisis in confidence when an accident or failure happens.

Our interdependent world, which enriches us in so many ways, is the real Y2K problem. Let's say that Corporation X has hired its consultants, fixed its computer systems, and declared to stockholders to be ready. Is it? Imagine the larger system that Corporation X lives in: suppliers, phone companies, electric companies, purchasers, bill collectors, insurance companies, banks, universities. Now think about all the networks those companies are embedded in. The complexity is mind-boggling.

The potential for Y2K catastrophe is not from individual computer chips failing but from the unpredictable interactions of multiple failures.

Managers should be extra careful be-

cause the same people who are experts in computer failures may not be experts in organizational failures. Given the urgency of the problem, and a real ignorance of how a lot of systems commingle, we are likely to see a lot of self-proclaimed experts unwittingly over-promising their real capabilities. That tends to happen when there's a lot at stake.

I'm no doom-sayer. I think it is most likely that the relatively rich throughout the world will experience minor disruptions while the relatively poor are at a higher risk for serious suffering. That's generally how the world works anyway.

But the truth is that for many problems, including the Y2K possibilities, there is no such thing as adequate preparation because we can't anticipate enough of the important things that can go wrong. Fantasy documents sometimes lead us to think that we're smarter than we really are. Better to admit the limitations of our knowledge. It's more honest, and it may even be safer.

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