

he Times They are a Changin' (or Why Windows will not Consume the Mac)

Part 3 (of 3) — The Information Technology Professionals

In the first two episodes of this industry survey, we looked at changes in the press and in the industry-at-large regarding how people are dealing with Microsoft. In this final chapter, we look at changes in attitudes among the professionals that have been perhaps most responsible for leading companies en masse into the arms of Microsoft. These changes are important for several reasons. Most importantly because people and businesses that really want to go with Apple and/or the Mac OS have been influenced (unduly) by questions regarding Apple's survival and whether or not they would be crushed or devoured by Microsoft. You've heard them: "Will Apple still be here in a year?"

Well, I'm here to say, "It ain't so." So, without further ado...

And the Information Technology professional said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the great Bill Gates, which he will shew to you to day: for the Mac, UNIX, and other false prophets whom you have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever.

The great Bill Gates shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace. The great Bill Gates shall lead us unto the promised land of standardized platforms and computer paradise.

And lo, the Information Technology professional led the people unto the way of the great Bill Gates, casting aside all others as though false idols. If one

of the people would cry out "But Gates has let us down," the Information Technology professional would shout "Still thy tongue, oh heretic. Have faith. For if the Great One has not yet shown us the way, it is because we are not yet worthy. Wait thee until the release of Windows 1000 BC, then shall ye see the the great Bill Gates is just and true and a champion of the people."

Somewhere on the road to the land of milk and honey, we missed a turn. Instead of digital nirvana, we find ourselves in the scene from Animal House where the Delta house geek stole the drum major's baton and led the marching band into a dead-end alley. Having forsaken all others, we hang on the promise of a better tomorrow while being ground into a brick wall by the tuba section.

f Digital Disasters

Bureaucracies bear much in common with Mastodons — they are big, lumbering beasts that are very hard to bring down. When I think of Mastodons, I recall an artist's rendering of one of the great, hairy giants surrounded by an entire community of spear-sliding primitives. It takes, one might say, a village to slay a Mastodon.

I recently saw a modern-day Mastodon, a government agency, stumble and fall. No spears here. A new fiendish weapon was employed — the death of 1000 Windows. An ancient Chinese torture cleverly disguised as an operating system "upgrade."

I paused, that day, to talk to a friend working a help desk at this large government organization. She was sprinting from one Microsoft-induced disaster to the next. Short of breath, she had just enough time to tell me that Windows 95 now comprised 5% of the desktops and accounted for a phenomenal 50% of the trouble calls. She was frightened at the thought of the carnage that would ensue when Windows 95 constituted 50% of the desktops and, Saints forbid, eventually 100%. They would have to hire more people, many more people, to provide damage control.

Fast forward a few months. The same "forward thinkers" that drove that Mastodon to its knees took another pot shot. This assault was made by upgrading from Microsoft Office 95 to Office 97. That should be fairly easy, you say. Should be — except for two things.

Thing 1 — Word 97 files cannot be read by Word 95 unless the files are saved as generic text documents — a manual manipulation is required. Ah,

the promise of Microsoft standardization. The minions received files they could not read. A great wailing went up across the land. Teeth were gnashed. Hair was torn. Already-reeling help desks were buried by 1,000 new calls.

Then Thing 2 — Word 97 installs with a certain document format selected as a preference. In the federal government, form and ritual are paramount. A memo not in the approved format is, you see, no memo at all. Hundreds of technical people were bringing thousands of pieces of correspondence that might as well have been in Sanskrit as far as the bureaucracy was concerned. Near-total paralysis. A fortune of taxpayer's investment up in smoke.

Secretaries threw down Prozac like Tic Tacs as technical people said "The computer made me do it." Much like the old Flip Wilson "The Devil made me do it." It's coming together for me anyway.

The systemic constipation imposed by every Microsoft upgrade is giving the IT people a worse name than they already suffered. Simultaneously, the IT folks are having to explain to CEOs why their budgets keep going up, up, and away. Microsoft, the cult followers intone, is the way, the truth, the light. More money please. They've forced their wishes on scientists, engineers, and artists who knew what was right for their job, and it wasn't Windows. Many IT folks, are bruised, battered, and scared.

This has driven some wild swings in IT professionals' attitudes. Some forge ahead with a renewed vengeance, trying desperately to exterminate the last vestige of competition. Without platforms to make a comparison to, there's no evidence that they made really treasonous decisions. On the other hand, many honest people who had blindly followed Microsoft towards that promised land realize they'd been duped. They meant well.

As the keeper of the Macs at my daughter's school, I often interact with the gentleman who cares for the PCs there. His daughter sits next to my daughter in class. We're neighbors and take light-hearted jabs at each other's choice of platform. He says it's best to stay in the technological mainstream. I say I'll never be a damned lemming. He owns a business providing IT services to industry, living off the chaos which is Windows. I own one doing creative work.

The other night, the gentleman in question, was very upset because a local computer manufacturer had donated some Windows NT machines to the city school system. Jim snapped, "Who the hell's going to keep them running?" I said "You!" We laughed. He didn't have time to do it. Neither does the staff of the city education system.

Mr. "Mainstream Technology" said "We're doomed now. We can't afford to stay in the Microsoft upgrade cycle." The perspective, you'll note, is quite different when your tax dollars have to pay for it, instead of making a living from it. He went on to offer that, "Companies like Apple and Novell had tried to produce quality products to meet customer's needs, Microsoft pushed all competition out of the way and locked you in hopelessly to their upgrade cycle." This was such a dramatic 180 degree turnaround for this gent that I felt as though I was in some weird Alice in Wonderland world.

What could have changed a man's views so profoundly? A man who makes his living tidying up the messy droppings from the Microsoft leviathan. He went on, "They lock you in with fear and keep a real solution just out of reach. If you compete, they crush you. They out-market and they out-attorney you. Product satisfaction isn't even on the menu."

Sea of Change in Attitudes Among IT Professionals

In a PC Week article, "Microsoft backtracks on ZAW for Windows 98," at <http://www.zdnet.com/pcweek/news/1201/01win98.html> we find Mr. Scott Turvey, vice president of technical services at Nicholas Applegate Capital Management Inc. Turvey says that "It's things like this that convince me I can't trust my whole enterprise to Microsoft," and "Anyone caught off guard by this is naïve." Referencing another professional, the article goes on, "Some corporate customers, however, said Microsoft's ever-changing messages make it very difficult to plan. For example, one user said Microsoft is pitching Windows 98 as a consumer-only product. However, this week Holden said Windows 98 can be run in corporations. 'I cannot bet my business on Microsoft's plans because they've done a bad job communicating the real deal to major accounts,' said a Windows beta tester and chief technical officer at a large Southwest organization."

Another recent article reveals that "Glenn Bookout, a principal partner with Barefoot Digital, a consultancy in San Francisco, admits there is a definite trend toward removing Macintoshes from large networks, but he denies that systems-management costs are the core reason." Bookout "sees in the triumph of Windows an economic conspiracy in which consultants and resellers push Windows computers because they believe they can sell more services and maintenance programs afterward. 'Some of this trend toward Windows is because it provides consultants with work,' says Bookout." CEOs are catching on as they see more and more of their bottom line consumed by these wonderful advances in technology that were supposed to make them more efficient.

These folks aren't anomalies. A January 1998 Newsweek article had this to say: "According to a monthly survey of 50 chief information officers by Merrill Lynch & Co., 68% think the Feds should pursue Microsoft. What's more, 59% believe the software giant abuses its power. The majority, 58%, want an alternative to Microsoft's Windows software and say Sun is right. Only 12% agree with Microsoft, while 30% are on the fence. The technology executives also support Sun as the keeper of the Java technical standard and think Microsoft is 'being a bully.'"

In many places, the mere mention of a Microsoft upgrade elicits responses of fear and nausea. You see, too many Mastodons have gone belly up, trapping too many IT professionals underneath them. IT professionals want an alternative that won't make them look foolish to their bosses.

f You Build it They Will Come

In a January 26, 1998 PC Week article titled "Readers: Let's agree to disagree" at <http://www.zdnet.com/pcweek/opinion/0126/26just.html> , columnist Stan Gibson says "One reader correctly pointed out that much of the demand for skilled people is caused by the proliferation of Unix and Windows NT Web servers because they require 'geeks' to administer them. The answer? Apple's Rhapsody, which is easy enough for non-geeks to use." That's PC Week, friends. A publication which does its level best to trivialize Apple while selling megabucks worth of advertising to Microsoft.

This is a window of opportunity for Apple (and others with good products) to strike. If Apple nails Rhapsody to anything near its potential, the time is opportune to unseat Microsoft. Will it happen overnight? No. Will it happen? Unless Apple blows it, yes.

Apple will not only survive, they'll prosper. In doing so, they'll make a large number of "experts" look like the narrow-minded, self-righteous bigots they are.

In this 3-part series, we've debunked the notion that the Microsoft monolith was unstoppable. Indeed, they've already seen their finest hour, and it has passed. Many in the press have disposed of their blinders and are holding Microsoft to some sort of standards, a big change. The rest of the industry fears and loathes Microsoft. IT professionals are tired of looking like blithering idiots.

Stay tuned, and keep the faith!

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