



Countdown

Terry Pinnell focuses on the year 2000 in the first of this new series exploring issues, trends and opportunities of particular interest to home office and small business PC users

Choosing a title for this new column presented a small dilemma. On the one hand we want to address subjects and issues that have practical value. We're thinking here of those whose PCs can have a significant effect on their incomes as well as their leisure and pleasure. But on the other hand, title notwithstanding, we intend to keep it reasonably light and bright. So let's kick off on a cheerful note. The End of the World is Nigh!

Just what are we to make of the so-called millennium or year 2000 issue, often cryptically abbreviated to Y2K? Pundits have been striking terror into our hearts recently with predictions that vary only in their level of pessimism. A typical line is that when the clock strikes midnight on 31 December 1999, the millennium 'bug' will make millions of computers around the world unusable. Now, that's not much more than two years away - less time than it takes some of us to get around to unwelcome house or garden chores - so what should we be doing to protect ourselves?

Good headlines are generally intended to grab readers' attention, as well as to present a fair summary of the facts. That seems to be the case here. Yes, there is indeed a major problem, it will cost billions to resolve, and it does need to be taken seriously. But for the great majority of the world's population, and even for the great majority of PC users, it's far from the Apocalypse. On a 10-point scale, if Noah rated The Flood at nine and the dinosaurs gave that earth-bound comet a 10, I'd assess Y2K as a modest two.

You can only take such a relatively optimistic stance if you're at the small office end of the spectrum, as opposed to a corporate user, when you'll have to face potentially daunting problems that we won't mention here. But the key factor is that you must be running mainly standard software products which are declared 'year 2000 ready' by their developers. You

— by Terry Pinnell —

should be anticipating using such software up to and after the millennium. It turns out that the great majority of us will be using application and operating system software from just one well-known supplier.

The analysts International Data Corporation and International Planning and Research forecast that by the time we wake with hangovers on 1 January, 2000, the worldwide installed base of MS-DOS, Windows 3.x, Windows 9x, and Windows NT will be about two, 37, 266 and 52 million respectively. That's a total of some 357 million 'users'. So for most of us at this level

the Y2K issue becomes the simpler question: Is Microsoft PC software year 2000 ready? According to Microsoft itself, and with a few minor qualifications, the answer is a reassuring 'Yes'.

The central issue is that some older mainframe computers only stored the last two digits of a year, to save valuable data storage space. (You can make a case that the resultant savings have been greater than it will cost to get over the Y2K problem, but that's another story.) A result of this shortcut is that it becomes impossible for those computers to distinguish between dates in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Further problems arise if programmers applied special meanings to dates with a year of '99' or '00', under the assumption that the software wouldn't still be in use when that date was reached. The

potential truly serious consequences in the mainframe arena have had plenty of justifiable publicity.

Happily, by contrast, Microsoft has incorporated four-digit dates ever since the first release of MS-DOS 20 years ago. Mind you, since there's no industry-wide standard on how to interpret two-digit shortcuts, some PC applications may still interpret them inappropriately, so we'll need to type in all four ('2000' instead of '00'). But relative to the severity and expense of the mainframe issue this is trivial. For 357 million of us, New Year's Day, 2000 should pass without PC meltdown. ●

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