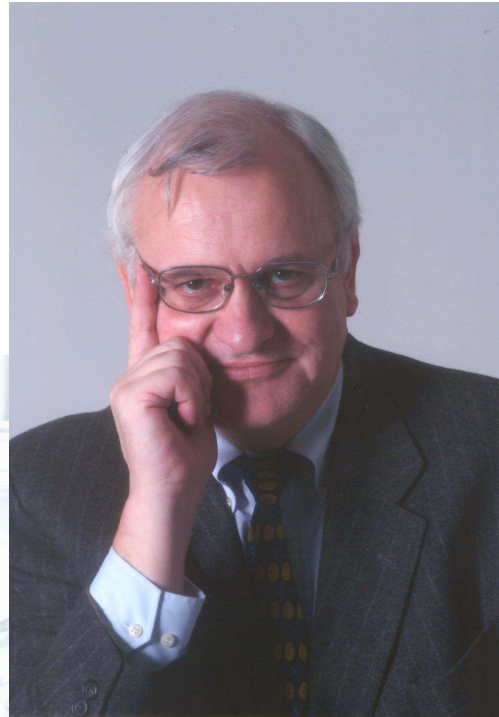


MIND BOGGLING POWER

In the early days, computer programming consisted of setting some switches on the front panel and settling back and watching the lights flashing. Nowadays things are simpler for users and even the non-expert can get a long way. However, as computers have grown easier to use, they have also become far more powerful, and as a consequence the range and variety of software packages is both amazing and baffling.



SOFTWARE, CHANGEWARE

Given the complexity of modern computers it is easy to forget that the 'soft' in software means 'easy to change'. And often quite a simple change within the software can avoid the need to replace expensive and troublesome hardware.

Of course, nowadays software development can be the most expensive part of system development. Nevertheless, the simple fact remains that it is the flexibility of software which has given computers the power to play the all-pervasive part they do in modern life.

It is surprising that so few of us realise the benefits that can be obtained by various forms of 'programming' or setting-up the software to do various tasks on our behalf.

CHANGE YOUR OFFICE

A prime example is the software that the vast majority of us encounter from day to day and that is Microsoft Office. It's an amazingly powerful piece of software, and few truly appreciate what it can achieve. For example, do you ask customers to complete forms that are emailed as simple Word documents? You can set these up so that only the relevant parts are changeable. Or, do you have simple price lists or other formulaic documents that could be constructed in Microsoft Excel?

And what about PDFs? Most of us use Adobe Acrobat to read PDF documents, but few of us are aware of the power within Acrobat to program it to perform simple tasks such as reformatting a document, or saving specific pages. These tasks can be set-up to be executed quickly, simply and efficiently.

And so it is with internet browsing software like Internet Explorer or Mozilla™ Firefox. If you regularly extract information from certain web sites it could be worthwhile to consider constructing scripts and automating some elements of the process.

IDEAS INTO ACTION

As with all aspects of life, nothing will happen unless someone takes control and leads. Whatever their role in an organisation everyone can consider the tasks they perform and the way in which they can be improved or streamlined. Just take a little

time to think. Then put the ideas to someone who can tell you just how much is possible.

One of our clients, 1st Call Appliance Direct, the country's leading web-based supplier of built-in kitchen appliances, recently applied some of the processes I have discussed here to their business. They halved their administration costs in a few weeks, and achieved a full return on their investment in just four months.

The benefits of investment in software can be achieved in most businesses very quickly and all with little more than the setting of a few switches.

NEXT COLUMN

Next month I will discuss industry-specific application packages and the advantages and disadvantages of bespoke development.

This article was originally published in the Newbury Weekly News Business Review in October 2006.

Charles Zealey is a consultant working with business professionals helping them to improve their organisation's productivity and effectiveness with the use of Information Technology. Typically a return on investment can be achieved with 6-12 months. To access help sheets go to www.itsolve.co.uk/HelpSheets/. For a free half-hour consultation on business IT issues phone 01635 869863 or email lisa@itsolve.co.uk.

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