

The Scourge of Corporate Software

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Imagine you've landed a fantastic new job. You arrive at an impressive, modern building, go through security and are shown to your office by your manager. You sit down at your desk and decide to write a list of things you plan to accomplish the first month of your tenure. You reach for the drawer where you expect to find a pen, and the drawer does not open. A small sign directs you to walk to the other side of the room and you do so, only to find a narrow door leading to a long skinny passageway with another small notice that says "enter for implements." You slide in and can barely move along the corridor. It's quite dark and difficult to see. You spot a ray of light coming from a hole in the baseboard, and you reach down, putting your fingers through an opening (the only one there appears to be within the dead-end hallway). Feeling a lever on the other side you move it with your hand and the wall releases to reveal a large room. On the other side is a cabinet and you walk over, open it and see a variety of pens and pencils. Relieved, you gather several and head back the way you came. You cannot retrace your footsteps however, for the wall has closed behind you, and you are forced to walk a circuitous route that was not previously visible. After several minutes you feel lucky to find yourself back at your workspace.

Upon sitting in your chair again, you start looking for a pad of paper and reach for the drawer you assume contains what you require. Again, a small sign directs you to walk to another part of the office space and this time to a ladder against a wall, with indications that if you climb, paper will be found at the top. You begin the ascent and after a few seconds you reach a ledge holding a small notepad. You take it and make your way back to your desk. After writing a few words you realize that the paper is stuck together and you can only use the first sheet. You return to the ladder, climb again to the ledge, and find another pad. Repeating the process, you get back to your workspace and again find that only the first sheet is accessible. It takes you several hours to write a dozen goals.

Discouraged, you wonder if the process will get any easier and you decide to talk to your manager. Alas, when you bring it up you are told that yes, this is the process you will use every day, one consciously chosen by the corporate office which has been convinced by a very slick sales team that this is the cutting-edge way of having workers access their daily tools. Your manager assures you that you will learn to live with it. Training will be available and people have been hired expressly to help employees through the complex maze that will have to be navigated on a daily basis in order to complete these simple tasks.

Sound fanciful? Actually, hundreds of thousands of workers deal with this scenario every day in the form of computer software, badly designed by people who don't actually use it, sold to people who don't understand its use but are convinced it will give their business an edge, and foisted on those who know what they need to perform the function they are hired to do but are given no say in choosing that which would facilitate the task.

In these days of Operation Excellence which includes mapping placement of work objects and process steps, the fact that no one appears to be tallying the countless hours spent dealing with software that requires workers to go through a processes analogous to the torturous route described above, is something hard to comprehend, almost as if there is a vast conspiracy to keep the workforce frustrated and companies inefficient. There is no overstating the problem. Ask anyone who is forced to use SAP for one of the functions it performs so poorly, or one of the behemoth electronic document management systems which could be substituted by a more simply designed and efficient program for a fraction of the price, and you will hear tales of constant frustration.

I wish I could say that after much research I've found a reason for the madness. Perhaps there is an alien competitor infiltrating our human ranks in an attempt to keep planet productivity low. Or is it a grand experiment by more advanced beings to see how much frustration our species is willing to endure before finally breaking down? There appears to be no explanation at all, however, except perhaps that those of us who are not computer geeks are at the mercy of those who are, many with little intuitive understanding of how the rest of us think, and no one dares to say the emperor has no clothes. Or to be fair (some of my best friends are software engineers, after all) even when programs are well designed (sorry, I refuse to include SAP in this camp), companies make one of two major mistakes (and sometimes both). That is, either they only purchase some of the features that make the software program viable and robust because they don't want to spend the money (and again we return to these programs being purchased by people who aren't actually the end users and have little understanding of how important some of these features are) or else they purchase the program and then commence to demand that customizations occur which destroy the integrity of the original design so that the program can never function as intended.

Having identified this enormous problem, do I believe there a solution in sight? I hold little hope. Perhaps some companies with enlightened leadership will figure it out and the lucky employees working for them will no longer be saddled with the constant affront to their striving for excellence let alone their performance of mundane tasks. Or perhaps there will be an uprising of workers in the form of a revolution, in which we demand to be allowed to have a say in choosing the tools we need to do our jobs well. Until that unlikely day arises, you will find me at my desk, cursing corporate IT, grumbling about lousy software and unintuitive software engineers and wishing I was allowed to be as efficient as I know I could be if there wasn't a 500 ton bolder blocking my way to the file cabinet.