TITLE: "PARKINSON'S LAW IN I.T."

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Since 1971: *"Software for the finest computer - the Mind"*

"As computer hardware capacity increases, software becomes more bloated."
- Bryce's Law

INTRODUCTION

Ever wonder why our computers typically last no more than three years? Many contend it is because of the fast pace of technological advancements. Maybe. But I tend to believe there is a little more to it than just that, namely "Parkinson's Law." For those of you who may have forgotten, "Parkinson's Law" was devised by C. Northcote Parkinson, noted British historian and author. His original book, "Parkinson's Law: The Pursuit of Progress," was introduced in 1958 and was a top-selling management book for a number of years (it is still sold today). The book was based on his experience with the British Civil Service. Among his key observation's was that *"work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion."* Basically, he suggests that people make work in order to rationalize their employment. Consequently, managers create bureaucracies and superfluous work to justify their existence, not because it is really needed.

As an aside, CEO's clearly understood Parkinson's Law, which became the driving force behind the flattening of corporations in the 1990's, such as General Electric under Jack Welch's reign.

AS APPLIED TO INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Whereas Parkinson was primarily concerned with people, his law is equally applicable to machines, particularly computers; for example, Parkinson's Law can be applied to computing in terms of *"Data expands to fill the space available for storage."* Years ago I had a Compaq Presario computer with 50mb of disk space, which I considered substantial at the time. I never dreamt I would be able to fill up the hard drive. But, of course, I did (as well as other PC's I have had over the years). My current PC has a hard drive with a capacity of 224gb and though I'm a long way from filling it up, inevitably I know I will for

two reasons: I now feel more comfortable with downloading large multimedia files (MP3, AVI, WMV, etc.), PDF files, data base files, and other larger file formats, and; Second, because developers have become sloppy in programming.

Back when memory and disk space were at a premium, there was great concern over the efficient use of computer resources. Program code was written very tightly and consideration was given to file size. For example, establishing a simple file index was scrutinized carefully. But as the computer capacity grew and hardware prices declined, developers became less interested in efficient programming. To illustrate, not too long ago packaged software installation programs were delivered on 3.5" diskettes. Today, it is not uncommon to use multiple CD's to install the same products. This means that as computer hardware capacity increases, software becomes more bloated. This is but one example of Parkinson's Law as applied in computing.

An another example, let's consider data transmission lines as used in networking. It doesn't seem long ago we were using 14.4 baud modems over telephone lines. I remember when we doubled the speed to 28.8 and then 56.4. It seemed like the sky was the limit with every increase. But eventually performance seemed to slow to a crawl. Was it because the technology was aging or was it because our web pages were becoming bigger and more complicated requiring greater data volume over the lines? Frankly, it was the latter. Today, DSL and cable are commonplace in households as well as in business and "dial-up" is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. But as data volume increases with the number of subscribers, will we ever hit a wall in terms of capacity with DSL and cable? Undoubtedly. Again, more due to Parkinson's Law then anything else.

Make no mistake, computer hardware and software vendors are acutely aware of the role of Parkinson's Law. It is what allows them to build-in planned obsolescence into their products. As consumers reach capacity, they can either add additional capacity or, more likely, purchase new computers.

There is undoubtedly an incestuous relationship between hardware and software vendors. Hardware enhancements are primarily implemented to increase capacity in order to overcome software inefficiencies, and software vendors make their products more bloated as hardware enhancements are introduced. To illustrate the point, is it a coincidence that every major release of Windows requires additional hardware support? Hardly. This is done more by design than by accident.

CONCLUSION

Parkinson's Law is just as much a part of computer technology as it is in the corporate world. But what would happen if we decided to "flatten" computer technology in the same manner that Jack Welch flattened G.E.? Keep in mind, Welch did so to eliminate bureaucracy and force his workers to become more efficient and focus on the true problems at hand. By flattening the "bloatware" we would probably get a lot more mileage out of our computers. But I guess that wouldn't be good for selling computers (or the economy).

I guess Parkinson's Law and the vicious circle of computing will be with us for quite some time.

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About the Author

Tim Bryce is the Managing Director of M. Bryce & Associates (MBA) of Palm Harbor, Florida and has 30 years of experience in the field of Information Resource Management (IRM). He is available for training and consulting on an international basis.

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