

Business Plus Article – May 2005 Best before 2003 – The Software Product Lifecycle and why it's game over for Windows NT

Not being a master chef, I am continually surprised by how many things have a best before date. My herbs and spices all said use by Dec 2003. When the chicken said eat by the 19th it meant it, and even the tins of Ravioli I bought to tide myself through a nuclear winter, proved to self destruct after 5 years. Apparently my Girlfriend knew this all along, and was alarmed by my expectation that anything should last forever.

So why is it such a revelation to find that computer software doesn't live forever either?

Unlike food, and other perishables, software doesn't get mouldy or smelly. It doesn't deteriorate or necessarily break down. You bought it to share files, or send emails, and that looks to be what it is doing, so why change it?

Well, the obvious reason is competitive advantage, and productivity. You probably bought the software in the first place, to save you money in the long run, by streamlining a task, or allowing your work force to work more productively. That's great. But if all your competitors are using the new features and improvements in the latest version, then you are, once again, behind your competitors. You are less productive and less slick than them, and you are once again vulnerable.

The less obvious, and possibly more compelling reason, is supportability.

Microsoft, for example, releases a new version of its server operating system roughly every 3 or 4 years and desktop software every 2 or 3 years. In between these versions, there are often service packs or step releases to keep the whole thing rolling forward. Each new version brings new features to help you work better, as well as improved performance and security. Things become possible that simply couldn't be done before, as technology advances.

To keep a technical team up to speed on 3 versions of each piece of software is incredibly difficult. Not to mention expensive. To find technical people who can provide adequate support on a product that was obsolete 5 years ago is hard enough, but to find developers who can fix code that was written 10 years ago is even harder (NT4.0 is now over 10 years old). For these reasons, Microsoft, and practically all other software companies have something called a "Support Lifecycle".

In a nutshell, what this means is that as time passes, the level of support that is available for a product passes through several distinct phases, until finally, you are on your own and use it at your own risk.

During the first of these phases, known as “Mainstream support”, the technical team are very au fait with the product, as they are generally using it every day. If you have a problem, it is generally pretty easy to find a fix. The software is continually improved to add value and if bugs are discovered, they are fixed quickly, and free of charge. This phase typically lasts for 5 years from the products release.

After this period, most business products move to the “Extended Support” phase. During this time, support is still offered on the product, but often at a higher cost. Security holes are normally patched, but other bugs will not be fixed. No further development is done on the product, and new products will cease to be tested for compatibility with it. Again, this phase typically lasts for another 5 years. **Windows 2000** (now replaced by Windows Server 2003 and Windows XP) enters this phase on **June 30th 2005**.

At the end of the Extended support phase, the product will be put out to pasture in the “Self Help” phase. What this means is that technical staff will no longer be trained to support it, and any bugs or security holes will not be fixed. The product is officially classed as obsolete. However, technical information for problems encountered in the past will still be retained and searchable, until such time as the company decides it is not worth keeping. **NT 4.0 entered this phase on Jan 1st 2005**.

What this means to you as a user, is that while your software continues to work, doing what it has always done, if something goes wrong, you may have a job on your hands to get it fixed. You can liken it to driving an old Ford Anglia. It was a perfectly good car in its day, and it may well run sweetly. But you may struggle to get spare parts when it breaks down.

Specialist companies like Raven Computers retain technicians with good skills in now-obsolete versions of mainstream software such as NT4 and Exchange Server 5.5, allowing them to offer help and support on these products after Microsoft has discontinued it. But as time goes on, the chances of successfully recovering from a failure in one of these products in a timely fashion becomes increasingly slim.

What should you do now? Bite the bullet and upgrade. Companies like Raven, who have a lot of experience in migrating from older systems, can help make the process quick and painless, and minimise the disruption to your business.

Remember, the longer you leave it, the more vulnerable you become, and the longer your up-to-date competitors have a competitive advantage over your business.

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