The Year 2000 Farce

Peter Errington

We should keep the two-digit year fields when solving year 2000 (Y2K) problems. Convert the existing series of year values to a string of values that the application programs can handle without error. Then convert all year values back before the outputs are produced. This will reduce the Y2K problem to primarily a job control language exercise.

As pointed out above, the calculations, compares, and sorts in the application programs would work perfectly. Therefore, my suggested method would give a high level of confidence that is missing in articles I have been reading on the Y2K problem; in these articles,
unforeseen surprises are feared from having to change date field lengths.

Some organizations, already worry-

ing whether they can adapt before

2000, have less time than they realize.

For example, a “99” in a year field may

not represent a year but instead be a

flag. Or information may be entered

now that pertains to the next century (a

loan today may have an end date in the

next century, which would cause the

program to reject the information with

the message that a loan cannot end

before it begins. This has actually hap-

pened.)

So in addition to ease of conversion

and high confidence level, my sug-

gested approach (because ease equals

speed) may allow deadlines to be met

that are more stringent than some orga-
nizations realize.

I have spent considerable time trying

to think of valid counter arguments

to the above proposal, and those I have

come up with have all been weak. The

most valid of the lot is that organiza-
tions might be required to furnish other

organizations with files that contain

four-digit year fields. But I cannot

imagine an easier programming job

than accepting as input a record with a

two-position year field(s) and produc-

ing an output record with additional

characters “19” or “20” added where

appropriate.

To summarize, it seems the world is

bent on squandering untold billions for

no valid reason.

About the Author

Peter Errington has spent his entire

career in data processing, starting in

1961. He retired in 1996, having worked for

three private firms and two government

agencies. From 1961 to 1971, he was employed

at the Southern New

England Telephone Co., General Electric,

and Informatics. In 1971, he joined the

Agency for International Development,

where he specialized in payroll and per-

sonnel systems and economic and social

data banks. In 1989, he moved to the

Defense Logistics Agency, where, among

other things, he worked extensively on

Continuous Acquisition and Lifecycle

Support and warehouse automation.

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Year 2000 PROGRESS
Mission-Critical Systems of
Federal Departments and Agencies

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Prepared for Subcommittee Chairman Steven Horn.
The departments and agencies are responsible for the accuracy
and consistency of percentages reported.
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