How Far Have We Come?

To put the evolution of software in perspective, you need to understand the typical mentality of new programmers and coders fresh from college and technical school. It will really make you feel “mature” and “experienced” — both euphemisms for “old” — to understand that today’s new programmers . . .

- Have never coded in a language that required segmentation or overlays of code.
- Have become accustomed to using an operating system that crashes or hangs frequently, sometimes multiple times per day.
- Have never used a punch card, cannot tell you how many columns are on a punch card, and do not understand what a keypunch machine is.
- Have never saved the confetti-like bits of paper from a keypunch to use later. (The bits of paper were called chaff or chad. If you want to know why it was called chad, e-mail me at david.cook@hill.af.mil).
- Vaguely remember when floppy drives were floppy. If they remember “real” floppies, they think they were always 5¼ inches (remember 8-inch floppies?).
- Do not feel fear and revulsion when they hear the acronym JCL. They do not even know it means Job Control Language.
- Think that loading a word processor that consumes 40-plus megabytes of memory is no big deal.
- Think that leasing a machine means going to CompUSA and spending under $100 per month.
- Cannot remember not having a hard drive to copy files to. Remember copying files on a one-floppy machine? It was like playing the accordion to copying multiple files.
- Cannot comprehend editing a file without using a mouse — and if they have Unix experience, never used VI (visual information) and probably like EM ACS!
- Have never coded in a language that required segmentation or overlays of code.
- Never used a calculator — or heaven forbid, a slide rule — to check the correctness of a FORTRAN program.
- Have never read — or probably even seen — a core dump, and have never heard of EBCDIC (Extended Binary Coded Decimal Interchange Code). (Remember? Nonsequential character sequences, multiple versions, and important characters missing).
- Have never waited hours — or days — for the results of a compile. (Because of this, they have never understood the importance of desk-checking code prior to a compile.)
- Cannot remember when compile-link-load-execute were separate steps in running a program. (Each step took a separate deck of JCL cards!)
- Think that “booting” a machine only requires one to turn on the power.
- Have always used WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) word processors. If you did not already know that acronym, you are the youngest this column is aimed at.
- Never sweet-talked an operator into upping the priority of a job to get a quicker compile. (They probably do not understand what a computer operator really does.)
- Have become accustomed to using an operating system that crashes or hangs routinely, sometimes multiple times per day.

— David Cook, Software Technology Support Center

Got an idea for BACKTALK? Send an e-mail to crosstalk.staff@hill.af.mil