

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Tempus Fugit

By Douglas E. Welch

No matter how good your high-tech work or how complete your technology procedures, time erodes all good practices. Just like water on stone, the effects of time may work slowly, but they can affect your technology projects in small, yet destructive ways. No matter how much work you put into establishing your “best practices,” without constant attention, they can fall into disrepair quickly and completely . . . possibly damaging your high-tech career, as well.

Creeping Inattention

It is a simple fact that, as a high-tech worker, many of the tasks you perform are mundane, tedious and even boring. It is also a fact that, often, these are the most important tasks. Without constant attention to these small tasks, you can find yourself in the position of having to explain system downtime, incomplete backups and, worst, lost data.

These mundane tasks often fall victim to the effects of time through creeping inattention. Systems that are properly designed often function so well that you are tempted to ignore them. You might not inspect backup logs as often as you should. Perhaps you aren't checking the Web access logs for signs of attack or missing files. Often, there are so many other problems demanding your attention, you can easily begin to ignore those systems that just simply work.

Unfortunately, these systems can lull you into a false sense of security. Nothing is worse than discovering that a system has failed just when you need it most. This is especially true of backup systems. If you don't spend the necessary hours to confirm the backup system is working, you can easily find yourself unable to restore data when you need it most. In order to truly rely on these systems, you have to do your homework.

Focus

There are several ways to insure that systems get the attention they need. Everyone has their own methods, though, and will need to find their own way. Below I have detailed a few techniques I use to insure that my most important systems perform when I need them most.

Daily Routine

One of the most useful methods I use to combat the effects of time on systems is the establishment of a regular routine. Just like brushing your teeth in the morning and taking the trash out, I use repetition to my advantage.

When I was working for a small Internet content provider several years ago, I usually tried to arrive an hour before most of the staff each day. This hour was my time to perform all the mundane, yet extremely important tasks. I would inspect log files, (especially the error logs), check tape backups, insure all Web services were up and running, and perform a host of other basic checks. This routine eventually grew into a check-list that others could use if I was out of the office.

I found that addressing these issues at the beginning of my day, when I was most fresh, helped to insure that the tasks would get done. Without a routine, it becomes too easy to get involved with the crisis of the day.

Revisit/Revise/Reject

Another important way of resisting the effects of time on your systems is their regular reevaluation. Every major system—whether it is backups, networks, or databases—should be reevaluated at least once per quarter. This active and concentrated review gives you a chance to rededicate yourself to maintenance of systems, clearly focus on any issues that need to be addressed, and remove obsolete systems. Without this regular reevaluation, you will soon find yourself ignoring these systems and, perhaps even worse, maintaining systems that are no longer useful.

Time is the enemy of all technology and, therefore, your enemy, as well. It breaks down systems, causes electronics to fail, and lulls you into a false sense of security. Many systems can be ignored for short periods of time. Although, if you don't develop a routine for managing your systems and revisit this routine on a regular basis, you might just find yourself in the unenviable position of paying for your inattention with your pride, your pocketbook or your position. □

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