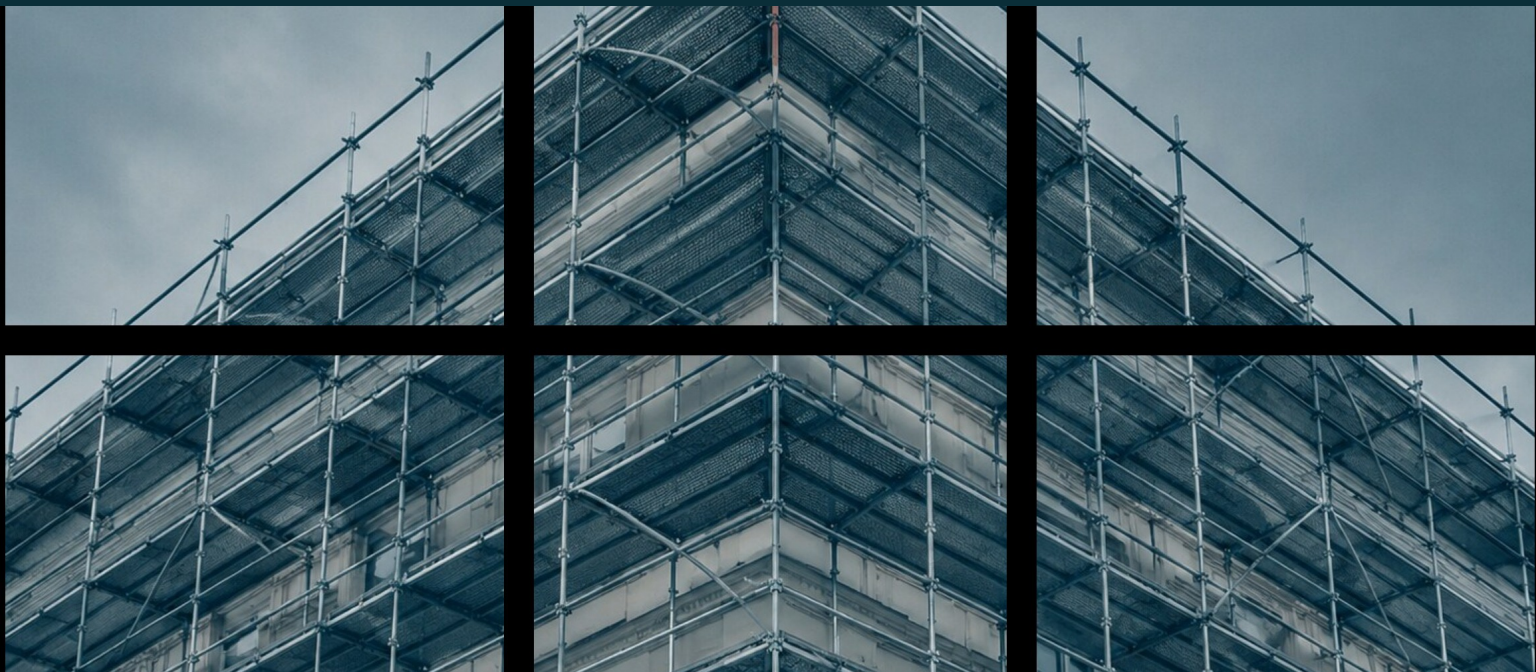


BEYOND DATE REPAIR

Y2K Was a Deadline. The Hangover Is a Management Choice

Why organisations that preserved the estate map can modernise while patchers must rediscover their complexity



Y2K Was a Deadline. The Hangover Is a Management Choice

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“The lasting cost of Y2K will not be the repair bill; it will be the decision to forget what the repair exposed.”

The morning after the deadline

On 3 January, the contingency room was still full. Printed contact lists lay beside telephones. Technical teams watched overnight batch runs, payroll files and payment interfaces. Business managers waited for the failure that, in most places, did not arrive.

By February, a less dramatic scene had replaced it. The programme binders were boxed. Contractors departed. Application owners returned to their normal duties. Boards that had spent heavily to secure the date change began asking whether the whole exercise had been exaggerated.

That question misses what the work revealed.

The Year 2000 programme was never only about two-digit dates. It forced organisations to discover what they owned, how their systems depended on one another, where the source code lived, which suppliers still supported old products and which business processes relied on the knowledge of a few long-serving people. For many enterprises, it was the first reliable map of their information estate.

The divide now is not between those that suffered failures and those that did not. It is between those that are using that map to modernise and those that have already put it in storage.

The patch was rational; forgetting is not

There is a respectable defence of the patching approach. The deadline was fixed. Replacing a stable mainframe application in 1998 or 1999 would have introduced more risk than correcting its date fields. A narrowly controlled repair, followed by testing and contingency planning, was often the most responsible choice.

That judgement should not be rewritten now that the rollover has passed. Many organisations succeeded precisely because they refused to turn an immovable compliance deadline into an uncontrolled systems replacement programme.

But a sound decision under deadline pressure can become a bad operating philosophy after the deadline has gone. The problem is not that organisations patched. The problem is that some have treated the patch as closure.

A patch corrects the immediate defect while preserving the surrounding structure. It leaves the duplicate customer files, brittle interfaces, undocumented batch jobs and obsolete reporting routines in place. It also leaves the organisation dependent on the same

scarce specialists who understood how to make the change safely.

Y2K did not create the fragility. It made the fragility visible.

The organisations that stop at remediation will continue paying for complexity they have now seen clearly enough to remove.

Two organisations, one rollover

Consider two composite enterprises, each with roughly 700 business applications at the start of the programme.

The first treated Y2K as a technical repair. It mobilised rapidly, catalogued 684 applications, identified 219 as date-sensitive and changed more than 1.8 million lines of code. Testing completed on schedule. The rollover passed without material disruption.

Then the programme was dismantled. The application register remained in a spreadsheet owned by the former programme office. Dependency diagrams were stored in departmental binders. Temporary staff left with much of the testing knowledge. Forty-three applications recorded as “retire after 2000” remained live because no business manager held a budget for retirement.

The second enterprise began in much the same way, but made three additional choices. It assigned a permanent business owner to every critical application. It used the dependency mapping to identify 96 interfaces that performed duplicate transfers. And it required every temporary date repair to carry a decision: retain, replace, consolidate or retire.

By the end of this year, that enterprise has not replaced everything. Nor should it have. But it has retired 38 low-value applications, removed 27 duplicate interfaces and preserved a small team responsible for maintaining the estate map. More importantly, investment discussions now begin with a view of the whole system rather than a proposal for one isolated project.

Both organisations passed the date test. Only one converted the effort into a management capability.

What the repair exposed

The most valuable findings were rarely the date defects themselves. They were the mechanisms that made those defects expensive to find and risky to correct.

- No authoritative inventory. Several lists existed, each organised around a different budget, platform or department. Nobody could state with confidence which applications supported a complete business process.
- Ownership without accountability. Technical staff maintained systems that business leaders assumed somebody else had approved. When a repair needed a decision, the absence of a real owner became visible.
- Interfaces as hidden infrastructure. Individually modest programs carried data between payroll, finance, order processing and reporting systems. Their importance was understood only when end-to-end testing failed.

- Knowledge concentrated in people. A retired programmer was brought back to explain a nightly batch sequence because the code comments described what the program did, not why the sequence mattered.
- Temporary becoming permanent. Systems introduced as interim solutions had remained for a decade because no later project included the cost of removing them.

These are not date problems. They are management problems expressed through technology.

The recurring mistake is to place them back inside the information technology function once the deadline has passed. Yet the estate became complicated because business units commissioned local solutions, acquisitions added overlapping systems, projects optimised their own scope and budgets rewarded new delivery more readily than retirement. Technical teams may maintain the complexity, but they did not create it alone and cannot remove it alone.

The modernisers are doing something unfashionable

The organisations making real use of the Y2K experience are not necessarily embarking on grand replacement programmes. They are treating simplification as a continuing discipline.

They are keeping the application inventory current rather than rebuilding it for the next emergency. They are naming business owners for critical systems. They are funding retirement work explicitly. They are testing complete business processes, not only individual programs. And they are asking every new e-business initiative which old processes and systems it will replace—not merely which new channel it will add.

This is less exciting than announcing a new architecture. It is also more likely to produce one.

The mechanism is cumulative. Each retired application removes maintenance, testing and interface work from the next change. Each clarified ownership decision shortens the next incident. Each documented dependency reduces the cost of the next upgrade. Simplification creates capacity that can then fund further simplification.

Patching creates the opposite cycle. Every urgent repair preserves another component that must be understood, tested and connected next time. The individual decision looks economical; the portfolio becomes progressively more expensive to change.

The board should ask for the map

The Y2K programme created unusual conditions: a fixed date, executive attention, common priority and funding for work that normally falls between projects. Those conditions produced information that most organisations had never assembled before.

The immediate danger is that boards will conclude, because disruption was limited, that the information has little continuing value. The reverse is true. The absence of failure is evidence that disciplined inventory, ownership, testing and contingency work succeeded. It is not evidence that the underlying estate was healthy.

Before the knowledge disperses, leaders should demand four things:

1. A current application and interface register with named technical and business owners.
2. A retirement list with funded dates and accountable executives, not vague intentions.
3. A record of temporary repairs that identifies where the underlying design remains weak.
4. A continuing process for end-to-end testing across the business services that matter most.

None of these requires a wholesale replacement programme. All of them require the organisation to resist the comforting story that Y2K is finished.

The lasting cost of Y2K will not be the repair bill; it will be the decision to forget what the repair exposed.

The rollover gave organisations a rare view through the walls between their systems, projects and functions. Some are using that view to simplify. Others are rebuilding the walls and congratulating themselves on a crisis avoided.

The distinction will shape more than technology spending. It will determine which enterprises can change deliberately—and which must rediscover their own complexity every time the calendar, the market or the customer forces them to move.