

Brian Johnson

This post made me think about some of the incidents when I was carrying a radiopager for Istel...

1 I got called into a well know car site where the computers were, and the operator explained that the system disk had failed (they were removable disks). He showed me, the software support, a system disk that had deep physical scratches in it, there had been a full-on head crash. At first, he had not called the hardware engineer in, or me, his first reaction had been to take the spare system disk out of the cupboard and use it to replace the one with deep scratches. That disk proceeded to get deep physical scratches too. So, being out of system disks he decided to call me in. He had still not called in the hardware engineer. I got there and told him that the drive was clearly broken, and it would just scratch any disk that was put in, and that the first thing to do was get the drive fixed, so we called in the hardware engineer. Nice hardware engineer chap came out, took the drive to bits, fixed it, put it back together, and assured me it was ok. The only other spare system disk was back at the Istel offices, so I headed off there in the middle of the night, and got that system disk. Took that spare system disk back to the car site put it in the repaired drive, and fortunately all booted correctly, and systems all worked ok. I don't think there was another spare system disk, it would probably have been a full reinstall the operating system job had that not worked. A long night, and I trained the operator up about the reasons it was a bad idea to put a spare disk into a drive which was physically scratching disks.

2 Another night I got called in and the labels which told one factory which engines and axles to build were not being printed. The engines/axles were produced supposedly "just in time" and there were many combinations of engine size, gearbox, emissions kit for different markets, and so on, and different kinds of axles too. So, without those labels one whole car factory was stopped, it didn't know what to produce, and just producing generic engines/axles was a definite "no no". Lack of engines/axles would shortly stop production at the main assembly plant down the road too, not good. Fair enough they had called me in, it could have been the print queues in software. They had also called the hardware engineer it too, in case it was hardware problem with ports etc. It didn't take me long to work out that the real problem was the comms line between the site where the computer was, and the factory where the printer was, the comms line was down, and BT the comms vendor were not on "out of hours" support, there was no way to get them involved until normal "day time" hours. So, there I was with the most senior people on-site at night glaring at me, all on peace money & their bonuses significantly impacted by production stopping, furious at their own management for not having a better support agreement with BT, and expecting miracles. Thinking very much outside the box, and making the solution up as I went along, I copied the files of the labels which needed printing to tape, took the

tape back to the Istel office, and printed off a whole nights worth of cards myself, then carried them down to the car, and drove them off to the engine/axle plant. So, they could restart working from the cards I had produced as a big “work around” that night. Another long night, got them through a big issue which was not really a software problem. BT were called in at 9.00 am, and comms line was quickly fixed, so normal service was resumed.

3 Not really a traditional call out problem, as they waited until 8.30 in the morning when we were in the office to call. They would not tell us what was wrong, just a very worried hushed “you had better get here quick”. Myself, and my friend, got there and we were asked to look around and guess what was wrong... They had produced hundreds of cars with red seat belts, and all we could see was masses of cars with red seat belts everywhere. Opps. One of their innovations had been to offer the car buyer the option of red seat belts, and we had been working on software changes to allow that for a while. We didn't really have a test system, the only real test was going live. We got back to the office and checked the code, and the loop which selected red seat belts for a particular car was not reset at the top of the loop, so as soon as any car had a red belt all subsequent cars would get red belts too. We quickly put a reset in the code, recompiled it all, and delivered it back to site and got it live. Phew, I cannot remember, but I think those cars with red belts got sent out to dealers as normal.

All this stuff is so funny looking back at it, a lot of responsibility for a young kid just of college on his own in the middle of the night. So many stories. A complete contrast to the day job in the office.