

Editorial

John Mitchell

People in general tend to use the *control* word somewhat loosely and so do auditors. This does not mean that auditors are not people, although real people seems to think of auditors as being some bizarre sub-species slightly below the amoeba in terms of evolution. Still, it could be worse. We could be double glazing salesmen, estate agents, or politicians, who all seem to rate lower than us in the public's esteem. Enron did us no end of bad and for Arthur Andersen it was a killer, but at least they have achieved some form of redemption. Terribly sorry the jury got it wrong, but you are now absolved, reminds one of the witch test back in the middle ages. If you didn't die you were a witch and would be killed horribly anyway. If you did die, then you were not a witch, just unlucky, and were hopefully now in a better place. It was a lose, lose situation for the victim. Which brings me back to the control thing. For the witch finder general it a win-win situation. He had everything under control because he could predict accurately the outcome of one of his trials and this is the underpinning of control – predictability. You can only control what you can measure and all a control is, is the ability to compare what you have with what you predicted. It is simply a test that is made at an appropriate time and place in the process. So not too difficult, but it is surprising how little this explanation is taught to up and coming auditors who are therefore condemned as a result to a career of muddy thinking and woolly reporting.

So if a control is simply a test against something that we can predict it is pretty simple to see how it applies in the world of IT, or anywhere else for that matter. The gender field should contain 'M' or 'F'. The program logic tests for these attributes and if a match is achieved the transaction is allowed to continue down the road. If it fails the test, then the user is informed and the transaction is held. A refund must be in the range of £50 - £500. Anything outside of this fails the predictability test and is rejected. So how do we still end up with those demands to pay £0.00, or risk prosecution? This is because a reasonableness test has not been applied as a result of poor design, which indicates that control has to be specified as a requirement and then built into the process from design onwards.

Simply because something meets the test criteria however, does not make it absolutely correct. For example, the refund could pass the range test, but still be incorrect in itself. The gender may pass the attribute test, but the boy may really be a girl. When I was young I could never understand how my mother could peer into a pram, example the bundle of wrinkles inside and then exclaim "what a beautiful girl". It was much later that I found out about colour coding and started to apply it myself until coming across a baby dressed in yellow. My "Oh, what a beautiful it" was not well received and it was at that stage I realised one really needed control in-depth. Sometimes we can build one test on another test to reduce the likelihood of error. Gender equals 'M' and operation type equals hysterectomy do not lie easily together, for example. No matter how complicated

we make the control (test) the basics remain the same in that we are testing for what we can predict. This is how test data is used and test scripts defined. We know both the question and answer, unlike the crew in the Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy who only knew the answer. Someone once wrote to Douglas Adams with a long monologue as to why the answer should be 29 rather than 42. I suspect this person was an auditor with control deficiency syndrome.

The reason for my theme is that in this edition there is a marvellous paper by William List and David Brewer which takes this simple concept light-years further by examining how control effectiveness can be measured. William is a previous chairman of this specialist group and was one of my early mentors in the control field. The beauty of this paper is that the authors keep the concept simple, but still manage to ask and answer all those awkward questions regarding control effectiveness measurement. This is a little like introducing the concept of $E=MC^2$ to Isaac Newton or calculus to Berewolf without the need for all the in-between stuff, but having it still making sense to them. Ultimately it all comes down to money of course, but perhaps that is the 42 of the control world. At least here we know what the question is.

Elsewhere we have a report for our current chairman Alex Brewer and a down-under column from Bob Ashton. Enjoy your summer break. Winter is not too far away.