Whatever happened to increased leisure time?

When computers started to get a grip on our imaginations and our lives, it was widely predicted that they would take the drudgery out of lots of aspects of life and give us all increased leisure time. Predictions of a three day week (without the help of Ted Heath and the Unions) used to be quite common.

Quite clearly that hasn't happened, and there is now an argument for saying that computers have actually increased our workload. This might not be immediately obvious if you think of the average working week now being nearer to 35 hours than the 40 hours common a couple of decades ago.

So what is this extra work?

Quite simply, it's all the stuff we are now expected to do ourselves that was previously handled by a trained representative of the organisation we're dealing with.

Think of booking a train ticket. In the past we would have gone to the station, and told the clerk behind his sheet of glass what we wanted. He or she would do any necessary checking of timetables, options, prices etc. All we then needed to do was to pay for the ticket.

A week or so ago, a very good computer support client of mine asked me to help her book a train ticket online. It must have taken us about fifteen minutes to work out exactly how the site worked. The word "Byzantine" springs to mind. When the job was finished, though, it meant that the train company had sold her her tickets without any direct sales effort.

Once you start thinking of examples, they pop up from lots of different places. Every few months, for instance, I get a frantic call from a computer support client asking if I can fix their printer as they've got to print off a boarding pass.

Think of the utilities – gas, water, electricity and so forth. It's far easier (and cheaper) for them to store our accounts online than to send paper bills out. We have to take the initiative to hunt down the details if we want to see them, rather than just opening a quarterly bill. Indeed, my own electricity tariff involves me submitting my own monthly meter readings. I

can't remember even an occasional visit from a meter reader in the last few years.

In a lot of instances, recent developments do indeed "empower" us (as the marketing people would say). I wouldn't have as close a grasp as I have on how my electricity usage compares with previous periods if I couldn't see all the figures turned into a simple graph online. But even these developments can seem to be huge complications and a cause for anxiety and stress for people who are not comfortable with all the technology that makes the developments possible. Clearly, there's a connection, here, between the age of the client/customer/service user and the ease with which (s)he uses this stuff.

I'm sure we can all think of examples where our "interface" with an organisation is so complicated and/or intimidating that it is genuinely stressful. I have many computer clients who call me out to contact internet providers (for example) on their behalf as they just can't face trying to do it themselves. I recenly helped in one such instance (with TalkTalk) and didn't get to speak to a human at all. It was all done by me screaming down the phone to a computer and then receiving text messages back (saying they couldn't find a problem, but the connection was miraculously restored five minutes later after having been broken for days). I'm sure that the irony of the name "TalkTalk" isn't lost on any of us.

Despite being a so-called "computer professional", there are two places that I myself really don't wish to go in engaging with technology rather than a fully-functioning human being. The first I've already alluded to: if I'm going away and need a ticket from, say, Paddington, I'd much rather make a 45 minute trip and buy the ticket in advance from a human being at a ticket window, than struggle with online booking sites.

No, thank you

The other is supermarkets and so-called "self-scanning". The grumpy old man in me says it can't be "self-scanning" as there is no intention to scan myself. Leaving that aside, though, I really really don't want to have to engage brain, prepare myself for stress, and scan my purchases myself. I just don't want to go there. It's not a skill I want to learn. I'd be quite happy to pay a small premium to have the checkout assistants continue to do their job. They are paid for it: I am not. There is a small branch of Marks & Spencer on Tottenham Court Road that doesn't have any staff at all on the tills (on a Saturday, at least). A very helpful assistant will offer to show how "self-scanning" is done, but I won't go there. I do realise, though, that dinosaurs like me are doomed to either giving in one day or starving to death. …and in the case of this branch of M & S, they even rub salt into the wound. Right next to the (unmanned) checkouts there is a big poster that proclaims "Shop your way". The chance would be a fine thing.

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