

# Server farms are run by smart, brave people

You are sitting at your computer and typing away creating a Microsoft Word document. After finishing, you hit the Save As option and ignore the warning about overwriting an existing file.

In your rush you accidentally hit the wrong key and overwrite a critical file. Since that original file was created after the backups had run there is no other copy. It's gone. You blew it.

All it can take is a simple and quick mouse click to really ruin your day. Computers do exactly what we tell them to do. Even with confirmation and secondary verification messages displayed by the software, we sometimes are in such a rush or just not paying attention and make the computer do bad things

Guys in my line of work with any years on them have had those moments. The only difference is that our mistakes can have much larger consequences



John Deans

than just a single overwritten file. The higher up IT people climb the tech ladder without being management, the more end users they can affect.

There are three main groups of IT people that run the worlds' computing infrastructure. They are

the software geeks, the server yahoos, and the network nerds. These three groups work side by side to make it all come together to keep websites available, emails flowing, and the Internet surf-able. The three groups also fight like the dickens, constantly ridicule, and quickly blame each other for most technical problems that arise.

Over the past 28 years I have been a software programmer, server room manager and network consultant thereby being a member at one time of all three of those groups. When I was running the Unix servers I had to work and tussle with the Cisco networking guys to keep users connected.

When I was rebuilding the Gigabit network for Compaq, I had to coordinate with the server farm staff when we switched over links that connected thousands of people.

During those decades of large enterprise level computer work we all made our share of large impact mistakes. Some of these OMG moments, which stands for "Oh My God, what have I done..." had negative effects on hundreds if not thousands of users and their computers.

Large computer environments are very complex with numerous interdependencies because of different tasks being performed by groups of networked computers. These computers are large servers housed at "server farms" that provide services like file storage, electronic transactions and name-to-address translations.

The boxes that connect them all are called switches, routers, gateways and firewalls mostly made by Cisco Systems. These are basically the electronic valves that control the computer networking pipelines which move terabytes of data every hour.

Software runs the server farms and controls the network boxes with all three IT groups acting as the conductors. When

they miscue this concert of flowing bits and bytes, disaster can strike. That happened last weekend after some poor soul typed the wrong command and basically stopped the largest search engine in the world for nearly an hour.

Saturday morning, Jan. 31 at 8:30 a.m. CST, a single Google.com technician was working on a new filtering system configured to eliminate spyware infested sites from showing up on Google's Web organic (non-sponsored) searches. This genius was probably sitting at some cubicle in California when he entered the wrong command which had an immediate worldwide effect.

For the next hour every search made on Google displayed a message saying "This site may harm your computer." If you clicked on it anyway it took you to a Google block page thereby stopping you from getting to your targeted site. Since Google.com accounts for 65 percent of all Web searches in the world, this was huge — really huge.

My wife first noticed this Google meltdown on her Mac at 8:45 a.m. our time and I immediately tried on our other Windows-based computer and saw the same thing. Quickly I used LogMeIn.com to try it on some

client PCs and also experienced the exact error.

Finally I verified that Harper at Computer Helpers was seeing the same thing, and then I was sure it was a massive problem at Google's server farm.

Within an hour they had the problem fixed, but it was big news breaking first on the DrudgeReport.com and later on all the other major news markets. I can only imagine what that person felt when he saw what was happening and realized he had caused it. That moment of clarity is horrifying. You want to simultaneously cry and throw up.

Odds are this fellow was in a bar Saturday night trying to lower his blood pressure and ease his chest pains. He is also dreading the numerous excruciating debriefing meetings that will be conducted over the next several days so everyone will understand what happened, how it happened and how they can avoid it happening again.

The economic cost to Google being dysfunctional for just an hour on a weekend will be enormous not to mention the negative publicity. Google has already lost half of its stock value over the past year and this surely did not help.

My heart goes out to this guy

and I hope he still has a job after the dust settles. I along with many of my tech peers have had similar (yet not that big and bad) OMG moments that has actually killed two of my colleagues in their 40s due to heart problems.

When I say the "pioneers get the arrows," I mean it. This job can literally kill you.

The years ago my mentor Harvey had to have a quintuple heart bypass at the age of 45 after he attained the coveted CCIE (Cisco Certified Internetworking Engineer) certification. CCIEs are the network gods in our industry that are paid handsomely but they pay the price. Harvey's still out there building and designing huge networks all over the world.

Bottom line: Large computer networks and huge server farms are run by smart and brave people knowing that any day they could accidentally stop our digital world which gives them nightmares. Trust me on that one.

Next week's column: Monitoring your computer environments.

*John Deans of DeansConsulting.com is a Brenham area computer networking consultant who can be reached at 289-2233 or John@DeansConsulting.com for questions and comments.*