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The *Interactions* website (interactions.acm.org) hosts a stable of bloggers who share insights and observations on HCI, often challenging current practices. Each issue we'll publish selected posts from some of the leading voices in the field.

The Rise of Incompetence

All public employees should be demoted to their immediately lower level, as they have been promoted until turning incompetent.
— José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955)

In a hierarchy, individuals tend to rise to their levels of incompetence.
— Laurence Peter (1919–1990)

We should be enjoying a golden age of competence. We have access to so much information. YouTube videos show us how to do almost anything. And there are impressive achievements: Automobiles run more efficiently and last longer; products are rapidly distributed worldwide. Nevertheless, there is a sense that the world isn't running that smoothly. Inept governments and poor service are common. Financiers whose ruinous actions led to worldwide recession didn't lose their jobs. In HCI, many nod when Don Norman says, "UI is getting worse—all over." How could incompetence be on the rise when knowledge and tools proliferate?

The opening quotations offer an explanation: the Peter Principle. In his 1969 bestselling book, Laurence Peter described why organizations keep incompetent managers and how they avoid serious harm. Could managerial incompetence be escalating, despite the greater capability of those who *are* competent—who, in Peter's words, have not yet reached their levels of incompetence? Consider this thought exercise:

Assume the Peter Principle was true in 1969. How are technology and societal changes affecting it?

INCREASING INCOMPETENCE

1. Today technology enables competent employees to find higher-level jobs more easily. Competent people are promoted more rapidly and reach their levels of incompetence more quickly. In the past, few employees had to wait the 62 years and counting that Prince Charles has for his promotion, but wait they did. Now software developers, university professors, and athletes jump to better positions. The quickest way to advance in an organization can be to take a higher position elsewhere and return later at the higher level. LinkedIn reduces the friction in upward trajectories.

2. Successful organizations grow more rapidly, creating managerial vacuums that suck people upward. Enterprises once started locally and grew slowly. Mass media and the Internet enable explosive growth. As projects ramp up and add team members, experienced workers move up a management ladder that quickly adds rungs. People can plateau at their levels of incompetence while young.

3. The end of mandatory retirement ages extended the time that employees can work at their levels of incompetence.

4. The decline of class systems and other discrimination is terrific, but egalitarian systems are less efficient: More people reach their level of incompetence. Competent employees trapped by a class boundary or a glass ceiling fail to achieve incompetence. For example, women with few employment alternatives could be extraordinarily capable teachers, nurses, and secretaries. I benefited from this indefensible discrimination in school, as did my father in his job. (If this argument is alarming, read to the end!)

5. Greater job complexity is a barrier to competence. As the tools, information, and communication skills required for a job increase, someone promoted into that position is less likely to handle it well. In addition, competent workers could once count on *remaining* competent, but skills can now become obsolete. "Lifelong learning" isn't a cheerful concept to someone who was happy to be finished with school 30 years ago.

You may be thinking, "The Peter Principle is oversimplified, competence isn't binary, lots of us, including me, haven't reached our levels of incompetence and don't plan to." Peter would disagree and insist that you are on a path to your level of incompetence, if you haven't reached that destination already. However, we should also ask: Could *other* changes wrought by technology and society *undermine* the Peter Principle? The answer is yes.

WEAKENING THE PETER PRINCIPLE

1. The Peter Principle addresses promotion in hierarchies. Hierarchy is not gone, but it is weakening. Children address adults by first names, executives respond directly to employee email, dress codes disappear, and everyone tweets. In rigid hierarchical organizations of the 1960s, communication moved up and down the chain of management. The efficiency and ambiguous formality of email disrupted this. Subordinates are more uncomfortable circumventing hierarchy with a telephone call or a knock on the door that requires a response than with email that recipients can ignore.

2. Hierarchy benefits from an aura of mystery around managers and leaders. Rulers tied themselves to gods; celebrities and politicians were quasi-royalty. Not so much anymore. All is visible. Leaders are under a media microscope, their flaws and foibles

exposed. To ignore obvious managerial incompetence is more difficult.

3. When organizations are rapidly acquired, merged, broken up, or shut down, as happens often these days, employees have less time to reach their levels of incompetence.

AND THE WINNER?

We lack competence metrics. Perhaps only *perceived* incompetence is on the rise, with greater visibility and scrutiny piercing a chimera of excellence that we colluded in maintaining because we wanted to believe that capable hands were at the helm.

Nevertheless, managerial incompetence appears to be accelerating, aided by technology and benign social changes that strive to level the playing field. The counterforces rely on weakened hierarchy, but hierarchy remains strong enough to trigger self-preservation maneuvers at the expense of competence, as summarized below.

HIERARCHY AND THE PETER PRINCIPLE

Our genes were selected for small-group interactions in hunter-gatherer societies. When agriculture and food sufficiency supported concentrated populations, extraordinarily hierarchical societies evolved with remarkable speed, producing the social control and communication needed by armies, religions, and governments. Our innate disposition to jockey for status in a small group leads to unpredictable patterns in large hierarchical organizations.

Members interested in stability and future promotions work to preserve a hierarchy. Removing employees who were promoted but proved inadequate has drawbacks. It calls into question the judgment of higher management who made the promotions. Why not leave them in place and hope they grow into their jobs?

Other strategies are applied when high-level incompetence could threaten an organization. Provide an inept executive with subordinates "who have not yet risen above their levels of competence" to do the actual work. Kick an incompetent manager upstairs to a position with an impressive title and few duties. Peter labels this *percussive sublimation* and describes

organizations that pile up vice presidents "on special assignments." In a *lateral arabesque*, a manager is moved sideways to a role in which little damage can be done. Another maneuver is to transfer everyone out from under a high-level non-performer, yielding a *free-floating apex*.

Peter described capable followers who were promoted to be incompetent leaders, excellent teachers who made poor administrators, shop-floor experts who became bad supervisors, and great fundraisers who proved to be poor legislators. Sources of eventual incompetence are intellectual, constitutional, social, and other mismatches of skill set to position requirements.

The phenomenon can be seen in more subtle hierarchies. A good paper presenter is promoted to panel invitee, and if successful there, invited to give keynotes. A young researcher is invited to review papers, then promoted to associate editor, then editorships in ever more prestigious venues, until incompetence is achieved. Percussive sublimation and lateral arabesques are also found in professional service. The visibility of competence can, ironically, undermine it: A strong, proactive conference committee member may deliver weak, reactive service when invited to serve on four committees simultaneously.

Although at times Peter claims that there are *no* exceptions to his principle, elsewhere he acknowledges that people work ably prior to their "final promotion" and suggests ways to avoid promotion to your level of incompetence. But it isn't easy. Once it was common to spend a career with a single employer—actors in the studio system, athletes and coaches with one team, faculty staying at one university. Years of competent performance while awaiting an internal promotion were common, abetted by glass ceilings and early retirements. Those days are gone.

The versatility of programming made it a nomadic profession from the outset. When I left my first programming job—which I loved—to travel, my manager tried to retain me by offering to promote me to my level of incompetence—that is, he offered to

hire someone for me to manage. Today, with job opportunities visible online, a capable worker aspiring to a higher position can likely find an employer looking to fill such a position: One need not wait as long as I did for such an offer.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Rapidly accessed online information is a powerful tool for skill-building, and it is logical to promote someone who does something well to manage others doing it. This *undermines* managerial competence: Managing is a complex social skill that is learned *less* when studying online than through apprenticeship.

Class barriers and glass ceilings may be under attack, but subtle biases remain and can impede promotions. By the logic of the Peter Principle, under-represented groups are *especially likely to be capable* as they more slowly approach their final promotion.

What should we do? Think frequently about what we really want in life, and keep an eye on those hierarchies in which we spend our days, never forgetting that they are modern creations of human beings who grew up on savannahs and in the forests.

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