

### **Oh-Nothing-Happens Syndrome**

It was a classical case of ‘Oh-Nothing-Happens’ syndrome. Who would have thought it possible find one in the halls of academia, in the institute known for its echelons of healers who had profound knowledge of syndromes, but never saw or suffered from one themselves?

I diagnosed it after NASSCOM put out a warning in the newspapers about software piracy. Till then I had not known the difference between licensed software, demoware, adware, and freeware. We had already purchased a computer for the department, and were freely using the operating system, office-suite, and the other assorted software that had been installed on it. I had been assigned the job of looking after the maintenance of the maintenance of the system through the services of the company engineers. I did not remember the department paying for the software, though the programs always declared they were licensed to us whenever they were loading, and also when we clicked on the menu item ‘Help-About’. I decided to bring up the issue for discussion in our department’s next weekly meeting.

‘I think we have a problem,’ I said in that meeting. ‘You must have read the NASSCOM article on software piracy in the newspapers.’

Some of them had read it, others hadn’t.

‘The law is that software piracy is a crime punishable with imprisonment and/or fine. The fine may be in lacs of rupees,’ I said. ‘We have to purchase the operating system and any other software we need.’

The Head of Department (whom everyone called HOD) looked uncomfortable. Spending money on software meant having less money to spend on whatever else.

‘But the computer came with the software. We did not install it ourselves. The computer engineer is responsible for it, not us,’ the HOD said indignantly.

‘We purchased the computer with pirated software on it. Purchasing stolen goods is also a crime. Even being in possession of stolen goods is a crime too,’ I said.

My HOD’s facial expression suggested I should have selected law as my vocation rather than medicine. But the words did not come out.

‘How much is the price of the software?’ someone asked.

‘About Rs. 4000/- for the operating system and Rs. 15000/- for the office suite,’ I said. ‘If we include the price of the other software that we already have, it will be about Rs. 200000/-. We do not actually need those programs like greeting card maker and graphics editors.’

‘We cannot spend Rs. 19000/- on operating system and office-suite’, the HOD said.

‘What do other people do?’ someone asked.

‘Nobody buys licensed software,’ the HOD said.

‘You mean you haven’t purchased licensed software even for your home system?’ I asked. I thought people would purchase licensed software when there was plenty of money.

‘Um, well....’ the HOD said, ‘my son does not allow me to touch the computer. So I don’t know’.

So the answer was that even the HOD had pirated software at home. Not a direct ‘Yes’, but a ‘Yes’ nevertheless.

‘Anyway the rule is not applicable to us. We work in a public, non-profit-making

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institute for poor patients,' the HOD said.

'I don't think the law is any different for us. The license agreements do not say so,' I said. What if they do not accept your argument? Who hangs then?'

'The HOD,' someone bold said.

'Why the HOD? Everybody in the department uses the computer. Everybody hangs,' the HOD said.

It seemed quite unfair that the HOD wouldn't release departmental funds for buying licensed software, and wanted everybody to hang for it.

'I think the person looking after the maintenance of the computer should hang in that situation,' professor No. three said. He seemed to be quite diplomatic, hitting three targets with one throw. He had protected himself, pleased the HOD, and got rid of a professor ahead of him in the seniority list.

'Whatever!' the HOD said. 'We will continue as before. Nothing happens.'

The discussion ended. I had detected my first case of 'Oh-Nothing-Happens Syndrome' right in my department. Thought the HOD seemed convinced that nothing would go wrong, not everybody seemed to be convinced. After a few days, somebody deleted the operating system itself. We were left with a dead computer. The HOD got the hard disk removed and kept it safely in the cupboard, so that no one would find pirated software even on a dead computer. This state of affairs continued for months, until someone managed to convince the HOD to buy software. We purchased Windows 98 and Microsoft Office, making that Gates fellow somewhat richer, and the staff members a lot happier.

Over the years that followed, I diagnosed a lot more cases of the syndrome in the institute. I tried to work out the exact etiology, but could come up with only some hypotheses. I leave the readers to go through the following list, and decide for themselves which is the correct one. If anyone comes with something more convincing, I would like to know about it.

1. Ignorance: it is a possibility, but not very likely, since it would otherwise be cured after education.
2. Neurosis: it is likely, since there is a delusion, not curable by adequate explanation.
3. Law of mass psychology: the law states that one must do what everyone does, since they all cannot be wrong. This is likely to be the cause in some cases.
4. Fear of change: it is likely. One gets used to something, and fears that a change over to something else may not work. An example is continued use of Windows (even if pirated) and refusal to use freeware like Linux, even if it is free, sturdy, virus-proof, and easy to use.
5. Lethargy: it is likely. One gets used to something, and does not want a change over to something else because it involves efforts at learning. An example is continued use of Windows (even if pirated) and refusal to use freeware like Linux.
6. Self-confidence: it is a likely mechanism in case of a Boss. It works somewhat as follows – 'I am Boss. Since I reached the top, I must be the best. Since I am the best, whatever I say will be correct.'

One must differentiate the syndrome from 'Pseudo-Oh-Nothing-Happens syndrome'. It is seen in junior level employees, who actually know what can happen, but

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pretend that nothing will happen. They know that whatever bad that will happen will happen to the Boss, and not to them. Bosses need to be wary of such people.

I had purchased Windows before Linux came along. So I did not throw it away. But I installed Linux too, and found it be what it is claimed to be – good, easy to use, sturdy (does not hang or crash easily), virus-free, and free. It runs OpenOffice made by Sun Microsystems, which does everything Microsoft Office does and some, and is totally free. It can even save files in Microsoft Office format, for cross-platform compatibility. It means you can take along those files to a conference and open them in Windows environment. I have a net browser, e-mail server, media player, Acrobat Reader, graphic editor, image viewer, OCR software, antivirus software, scheduler, and zip-unzip software, just to name a few. All are freeware, all are extremely good and downloadable from the net. Drivers for printers, scanners, and CD-writers for Linux are available on the net, so that one does not have to throw away old hardware after switching to Linux. I see nothing wrong with buying Windows and using it. But if one does not want spend money on it, I suggest one should switch to Linux and other freeware rather than suffer from the ‘Oh-Nothing-Happens syndrome’ and continue to indulge in software piracy. I have been unable to cure a single case of this syndrome so far, but not for lack of efforts. Perhaps it has no cure. But I think it is entirely preventable. This article is a preventive measure I offer the future generations of healers who will work where I work today, so that one day the institute will be free of this syndrome.