Don't Let Your Software Trip You Up

When your home computer throws a wobbly, the worst that might happen is you lose your recipes, but if you're an aviation operator the results could be disastrous.

There are all sorts of fish hooks you should be aware of if you're relying on documents and spreadsheets to help run your aviation operation.

Darryl Hodgson, an IT professional from Christchurch, has come across a few of them.

"You get a little flashing icon saying, 'do you want to upgrade now?' And you say 'yes'. Everyone wants the latest and greatest but there are consequences to that.

"So you upgrade to the latest version, but you find some things aren't compatible. You had a spreadsheet macro that you wrote 10 years ago and now it doesn't work.

"Or you might use a traffic light configuration where a spreadsheet cell will go from green to red to alert you when, for instance, a part needs replacing, or crew are due for training.

"If that system fails, how are you going to know when a part needs replacing?"

Darryl says people need to be aware that when they upgrade to the latest software, or transfer data from one version to another, formulas and macros can break.

How do you know if it's working or not?

"You wouldn't have to test every cell in a spreadsheet, you could test just a couple. But who's going to remember to do that? Who is going to take that responsibility?"

Darryl says such issues can be mitigated.

"If it is a mission-critical situation, you've got to put some controls in place. Making sure everyone in your team is running the same version of the software is a good place to start.

"Using a document management system will also save you a lot of headaches. It means you have to check in and check out your documents. Changes get recorded, and can be tracked if there's a problem.

"The large airlines will have IT infrastructure in place so the versions of software and patches they run will be airtight, but it can be a challenge for smaller operators."

Darryl says operators could consider getting in an IT expert for quarterly health checks.

"You wouldn't sort out your books without an accountant, or sell a house without a solicitor, so why try to fix a computer problem on your own?"

Another common scenario is where people will be working from home on their laptop and they'll be working on a version of software different to the one at the office.

"Everything looks fine but when they open it up at work, it's different. Inevitably they end up copying and pasting. Or you might have two spreadsheets, one on your server and one on your desktop and you end up copying from here and pasting there. The formatting and formulas you set up at the start can become corrupted along the way."

Transferring data from one version of software to another can be fraught with problems, so aim to do everything in the *one* document, on the same software platform and version.

Darryl says even if you are working on different software applications try to save documents in a common format.

"If you do have two different versions of software, you can lock down the *save as* functionality so that your *save as* function is always the same version." ∎