

The Recursive Application of the Pareto Principle to Housecleaning

Fred Burch 9/2/19

For Beth, who has been accumulating stuff since 1975

The Pareto principle* states that, for many events, roughly 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes. Applied to housecleaning, this means that about 80% of any apparent messiness is probably due to only 20% of the actual mess.

This observation can lead to considerable savings in labor: rather than cleaning up 100% of the mess, it is possible, by identifying and cleaning up the problematic 20%, to achieve an 80% improvement in appearance by exerting only 20% of the effort.

Clearly, any reasonable person would be satisfied with an 80% improvement in appearance, and the older reader may be satisfied with a more modest improvement (as any user of online dating sites for seniors can attest, as people grow older they grow less picky).

If so, truly spectacular savings in labor can be achieved by the recursive application of the Pareto principle: using the above example, once the problematic 20% of the mess is identified, rather than cleaning the entire 20%, the Pareto principle can be again applied to identify the problematic 20% of the original 20%.

The result is that, for only 4% (20% x 20%) of the initial effort, a 64% (80% x 80%) improvement in appearance can be obtained.

Repeated recursive applications lead to even greater savings in effort: applying the Pareto principle three times gives a 51% improvement in appearance for only 0.8% of the initial effort and four applications give a 41% improvement in appearance for 0.16% of the effort (See Figure 1).

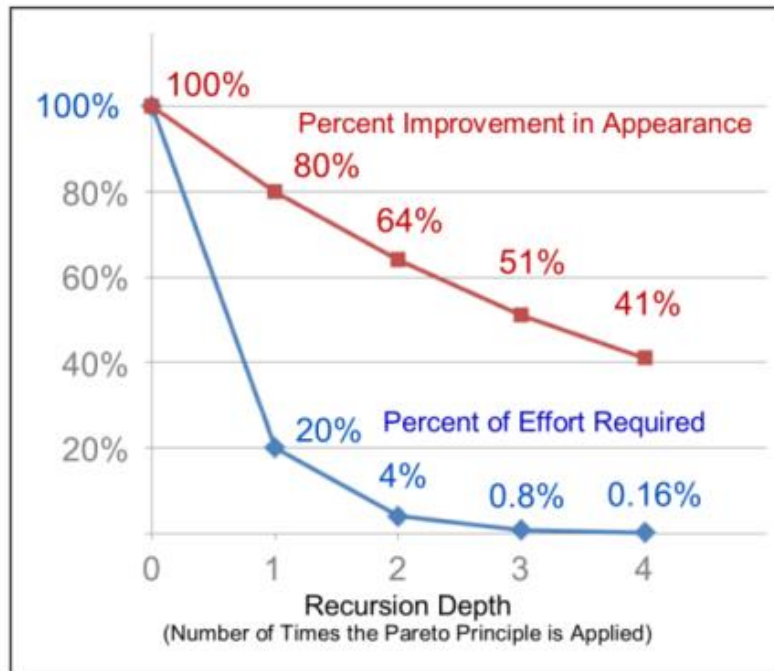


Figure 1 The Relationship of *Improvement in Appearance* and *Effort Required* in the Recursive Application of the Pareto Principle to Housecleaning

Unfortunately, since the total effort required asymptotically approaches zero, the Holy Grail of expending no effort whatsoever is unattainable; however, the approach suggested in this article will allow the reader to maintain an acceptable level of cleanliness with a minimum expenditure of effort.

* en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pareto_principle