

St. Louis Globe-Democrat

INTERNET: A quick look in the crystal ball

Few reminders of old days left

By Steve Epner

Friday, December 25, 2009



I have been working in technology since the mid-60s. The changes I have seen in the last 40 years can seem overwhelming – especially to members of my generation. Some of the changes have been so complete and pervasive that there are few reminders of the old days left.

Not only do young people have no idea what it means when they are told someone sounds like a broken record, my grandson wanted to know why we call pushing buttons "dialing." Today, we are told the pace of change is increasing. So what might we look forward to in the near future? Some of the items listed below may seem obvious, but believe me, they are not.

What is most important about any look into the future is how we react to it. If you are a business leader, you **MUST** determine how each item will affect your business – what you do, how you do it, and who you do it for.

We will continue to see the convergence of the telephone, computer, and television. In business they call it unified messaging. Everything will come together in a seamless package. New devices the size of a cell phone will project the screen image on a nearby wall (or seat back). There will be an optional, external keyboard that unfolds or unrolls crating a total package is very small and completely portable.

We will have access to everything, wherever we are, and at any time. That is the good news. That is also the bad news. We are going to need to disconnect and recharge our batteries (personal and those in the equipment). After filling all of our time gaps, we will need to create new gaps to remain sane.

Advances in voice recognition will make it easier to use this wonderful technology while driving, but the potential for distraction is still great. I foresee many new laws and regulations against using certain devices while operating a vehicle. This is just one of the many ramifications of the quickly changing technology landscape.

Business owners need to determine how to use this new found connectivity. Stores already can send advertising or coupons to a cell phone when someone is in the vicinity. Phones can read barcodes and automatically download detail descriptions of the product, videos of it (being

modeled or showing how it is used), and even providing comparative prices from different stores in the area.

The RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) tags being used on some products and in shipping are already available in identification badges. No more clocking in to work, the system will know exactly when you walk through the door. In case of an emergency, the applications will be able to pinpoint the location of each person in the facility.

Questions like: “Is this good management or Big Brother?” will have to be answered. We need to think about how people will react. Then we need to react responsibly ourselves.

Dealing with negatives, whether they are related to distracting us when driving or invading our personal space, will determine if a change is seen as positive or negative.

Management must also be considerate of the “generation gap.” Not everyone will be affected equally by new technology. Younger people who have grown up with the new social media and were taught to read and write online will have an easier time. Older adults will find some of the changes daunting if not outright terrifying.

At a recent discussion of ramifications from the new technology, it was suggested that we no longer needed to teach our students cursive writing. They all keyboard. The few times a pen is used, they can just print. Logically, that is the right answer. For a large portion of the population, that will be a change they cannot understand.

So, as you look forward to the New Year, think about the changes you see coming. Ask yourself, how will they affect me? Then play with the answers. Every answer will represent a new opportunity for the future.

Steve Epner is founder and president of the Brown Smith Wallace Consulting Group, the second-largest locally-owned independent full-service CPA and business consulting firm in Missouri. He is currently an Innovator in Residence at Saint Louis University.