

The Invisible Revolution

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In the words of John Naisbitt, "We are drowning in information, but often starved for knowledge. It is nearly impossible to go more than a week without hearing the words 'information superhighway,' 'Internet,' or online communications."

We all seem to be trying to take a drink from an information fire hose. Most of the language we hear telling us how to take this drink sounds strange and foreign. Is this new communications stuff hard? Well, it's not easy. Is this stuff necessary? It depends on which century you want to live in. What happens if I ignore the whole thing? You will be out of business, and sooner than you think. Ask your colleagues in Hawaii how a private communications system has been used against them. Your good intentions will not keep your competition from overwhelming you.

How Did This Happen

For centuries we have communicated physically and directly. Face to face conversations are interactive (unless they involve your boss), and direct (unless they involve your spouse). Letters, books, newspapers, and magazines have weight and substance. We are most comfortable with things we can see and feel. And chiropractors are probably the most hands-on of health care professionals.

The telephone revolutionized personal communication. We can pick up the telephone and hear a familiar voice on the other end. Television came along to revolutionize how we get news and entertainment, but you are subject to seeing material that someone else schedules, unless you have mastered your VCR. Like the television and telephone, a new appliance, the computer, has intruded into our homes and offices.

What Is It?

"It" is an obscure interconnection of a great many existing computers, primarily over existing telephone lines and satellite links. It uses mystifying stuff called software that, while you can't see it, directs the action. It goes by the generic name of the Internet. According to a recent CNN poll, 85 percent of all US adults agree that the Internet is good for people and the economy, but more than 55 percent of them have no idea what it is or does. More than half of the other 45 percent think they know, and are absolutely wrong. The Internet is really all the people, whether organized into specialty groups of common professional interest, working through private bulletin boards, or the million using the consumer oriented, general interest, mass market international networks. One interesting point is that the Internet has been getting all the publicity, but the private bulletin boards are cumulatively several times as large. In either case, it is the idea of learning how to use mostly existing tools to find the information you want and need and communicating with the individuals and groups of common interest, privately, at your convenience, but instantly.

Why Is This So Hard?

Three things make this less than easy. First, unlike telephones and television, this revolution is transparent. It uses personal computers, which are now so commonplace that they have out sold

televisions in the US in both 1994 and 1995, and it runs through telephone lines. Second, it is knowledge-based, which you can't see or feel it. It was developed by a secretive subculture we usually call computer nerds. They have learned that if you master the flow of information you can affect the future. Last, the rate of improvement in technology and capability is faster than anything anyone has experienced before. What was considered impossible six months ago is now becoming routine. Again, this is a knowledge revolution, not an industrial revolution. Success belongs to those who are not afraid to learn.

What's Next?

As a society we are much less than midway through this revolution in communication. But this revolution is upon us without most of us being aware that our lives have already been profoundly changed forever. The revolution is transparent but very real. The effect is already transforming how we plan, work and make decisions. The revolution is providing us with nearly instant communication from one person to many selected people, or one to one connections. It makes available unprecedented volumes of information. It also frees us to conduct business, whether connecting with one another or a group, and collect information. In the case of a very few systems, it permits actually doing the selecting, buying and selling of commerce, at a time of our choosing and convenience, but with the very latest product information and pricing.

What Does It All Mean?

The clear implication of this communication's revolution is survival. It is the survival of special interest groups, businesses and other enterprises, and even professions. Yes, to participate it is necessary to learn how to adapt your computer. You have to learn what a modem is, and how it plugs in and connects. You probably have to fix some things in your computer's set-up that you were getting away with or didn't even know were wrong because you never really used much of the system's capability before. You also have to deal with telephone line and connection problems that only reveal themselves when this revolution begins to tax the lines with enormous data transfers. When you are successful you then have to learn where to go to find the data and services that will be to your best advantage. Commerce and the Consumer

It is now clear that exchanging news and information and answering inquiries is only the beginning of the revolution. A long-term impact will be consumer buying. The more far-sighted companies recognize the most cost-effective way to sell is online. Product descriptions, prices, and new product releases can be made nearly instantaneously worldwide. Consumer contact can be instantaneous and at their convenience. There is no other way to get new product developments to market as fast (compare the high costs of publishing catalogues, for example). There will always be human contact, but it can be managed for special situations. Record keeping becomes fully automated at both ends of every transaction.

The problem for most people is that all this is intimidating, full of new and incomprehensible jargon, and a bit intangible. It can cause brain cramps. But if you don't succeed in keeping up with the technological advances, and your competitor does, you will never catch up. Your competitor will make better decisions, exert more influence, and conduct his business more efficiently because of his relative proficiency in managing information specific to his profession.

There is the story of two campers confronted by a ferocious bear. The first camper drops his knapsack and starts running. The other camper yells at the fleeing camper, "You can't outrun the bear."

"I only have to run faster than you," yells back the runner.

I think the bear's name was something like Managed Heath Care.

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