The Technology Revolution[s] Go On

A Look Back and Ahead at Trends

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Scholars of the revolution process remind us that, like France's, most revolutions are half over before the affected people know they are under way. Whether we have noticed or not, here are some well underway:

1. On-premises storage: Most users know the dangers of "going naked," i,e. without backing up data while hoping for the best. Remember those s-l-o-w hard drive backups on tape that always failed to create a full restore? We resolved, of course, to backup all the data, at least, on a bushel of floppies, but didn't get around to it. Iomega's ZIP disks held much more than 3.5" floppies but at too high a price. Write-once backup CDs were much cheaper and usable on all computers, but burning several tied up the computer and user quite a while. Still better were DVDs and automated external hard drives using USB or Firewire cables. Then came Vista, which rejected all my previous backup software programs. I still miss "Bounceback," which was included with an external Seagate and made file-by-file backups, not just images. Today, with 1-T drives going for a little over $100, nearly all of one's data and pictures, at least, can be salvaged easily from such a drive. Solid-state drives use even less energy. Their prices and capacity are tracking Moore's Law right on schedule. Within five years, spinning-platter hard drives will be found only on museum shelves near the eight-inch floppy drives. This month's 8-Gb thumb drives should be replaced with similarly-priced 64-Gb drives by next July. These, also known as flash drives or key drives,ll sometimes make moving files between computers (by "Sneaker-net") easier than getting administrator privileges and moving them via a network.

2. Off-premises storage: This long-needed form of "cloud computing" meets an urgent need. Gmail pioneered—and inspired its competitors to offer—2-Gb per account of free permanent storage of email and attachments on their distant sites. Web download sites offer a free utility to treats one's Gmail account as a regular drive visible in the My Computer folder. With a high-speed Internet connection, the drive becomes a place to store files without opening email. OK, that is the theory anyway. My Gmail account opens fine in the regular way, but my Gmail drive does not. After being told the Login failed, I clicked on the help file to find the cure, but instead got this message: "The Help for this program was created in Windows Help format, which depends on a feature that is not included in Windows Vista." Arrrggghh. Why am I not surprised?

For other choices for off-site storage that can be accessed from elsewhere, two popular choices at Mozy.com and Carbonite.com. Mozy, which boasts over a million customers, offers 2-Gb free storage per computer or unlimited backup for one computer at $4.95 a month. Carbonite offers a 15-day free trial, but then unlimited storage costs $5 monthly. Another highly-rated service, ElephantDrive.com charges $4.95. Idrive, gets mixed reviews. Its pricing seems a bit vague, starting with 2-Gb Free Basic, then 10-Gb more free if the user supplies five email addresses of potential customers. I use Carbonite but Mozy‘s impressive ratings might convince to try it on another computer. One note of caution about selecting one other than Mozy or Carbonite: One of the Big Two competing with Mozy not long back was Xdrive. It shut down in January, 2009. If we want to trust our data to distant strangers, I only trust the current Big Two. At just $60 per year per account, even a one-terabyte external hard disk costs more.

3. Device convergence: The Blackberry and iPhone stretched the minds of tech enthusiasts. Thousands of downloadable apps and functions quickly arrived for sale. Wireless Web access spreading throughout much public space, computers, cameras, and once-mundane cell phones have merged with GPS. This melding in turn raises Expectations, and inspires market options to meet them. Intel‘s tiny, cheap, low-powered Atom microprocessor quickly led to ultra-small Netbooks powered by the almost-abandoned Windows XP Basic. With improved batteries and solid-state storage drives, some of these little machines can fit in a topcoat pocket and remain self-powered on a flight nine hours on a flight from New York to Los Angeles and maybe to Hawaii. Tech-poor nations that were never wired for telephones have skipped over the copper-on-poles era and have cell phone (read “Web”) access in areas far from pave roads. Even the U.S., which is not in the top dozen of “wireless access” nations will soon convert remaining water towers, church steeples, power-plant chimneys, and bare hilltops to points of access. Satellites and microwave transmitters can fill most of the remaining gaps. The changes streaming at us with such speed compare to telescoping the Pony Express, continental telegraph and telephone systems, commercial radio, and television into one generation. In our immediate future we will adopt or adapt still-developing technologies now originating in nations that used to look to us for innovation.

(To be continued in a future edition of the ICON Graphic)