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TECHNOLOGY & YOU

Lessons From A Dizzying Decade In Tech

A look at the lessons learned since this column debuted a decade ago

In the summer of 1994 the Internet was still mainly an academic plaything. The company that became Netscape Communications ([TWX](#)) had not yet released its Web browser. Many computers still ran MS-DOS, Intel's ([INTC](#)) new Pentium chip was a luxury, and a 1-gigabyte hard drive was considered huge. And I wrote the first of about 500 Technology & You columns.

I've learned a lot in 10 years, during which I hope I have gotten better at my task: helping you use technology more effectively in your work and your life. Probably the most important thing I've learned is that technology remains far too hard for most folks to use and most people can only utilize a tiny fraction of the power at their disposal. Yet companies continue to concentrate on adding features to overstuffed products rather than making the products more usable. (Apple ([AAPL](#)), much of the time at least, is a happy exception.)

Another lesson, which probably isn't surprising, is that people are very resistant to change -- and their hesitation may be laudable. I sometimes feel frustrated watching someone use old hardware or software when I know that they could do much better at little cost. But more than a few times, they've been right and I've been wrong. If you have something that does the job, why go through the turmoil of change just because there's something new on the block? (This doesn't mean you can keep that old Windows 95 PC going forever; at some point, like an old car, it's more trouble than it's worth.)

A DECADE OF LISTENING TO PITCHES has taught me to be skeptical of promises about new products and services. My very first column featured a "personal communicator" called the Motorola ([MOT](#)) Envoy that never sold more than a handful of units. My largely favorable, but naive, judgment was based on a demonstration on the Motorola campus. Now I know that anything can be made to work under controlled conditions. These days, I guarantee my assessment of products is based on hands-on testing in real-world conditions. And I have learned to discount vendors' glowing accounts of future products, which will almost always come to market late and with some of the most interesting features missing.

A few more regrets: 10 years ago, it was hard to foresee the Internet boom that was just around the corner -- and hard to tell how it would play out. I first acknowledged the Net in an October, 1994, column on products that made it "easy" to add dial-up Internet access to Windows 3.1, which had no built-in networking. During the craziness of the late 1990s, I was more skeptical than many, but not nearly skeptical enough about an industry and an economy based largely on wishful thinking. For example, I had a weakness for wireless e-mail schemes that were years away from practicality and for electronic books, which have yet to find a significant place in the market.

Yet some dreams do come true -- even though the path of a technology from concept to reality can be a long strange trip. Back in the mid-'90s, technologists were trying to combine personal computers and telephones in interesting ways. Consumers and businesses, suspecting that the pairing would

take reliable, easy-to-use phone service and make it as balky as a 1995 PC, wisely rejected the notion.

The idea, however, never went away. And after toiling through boom and bust, engineers have brought this concept to the edge of the mainstream. They were aided by the development of more robust computer networks, better PCs, and new techniques that let you make and receive Internet calls just like the old-fashioned variety. The result of those efforts, called VOIP (voice over Internet protocol), could bring real competition to local phone service and produce as great a revolution in the telephone industry as the breakup of AT&T ([T](#)). After a painful retrenchment, the industry has its innovative juices flowing again, albeit tempered by experience. There are sure to be more speed bumps. Still, the next 10 years should be at least as interesting and exciting as the first.

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