

Gee Whiz

What's new and what's necessary

When it comes to technology, the most important things are the ones that don't sound sexy," says Ron Ellis, a Sacramento-based technology consultant and founder of 2SS.Com, an e-newsletter focused on identifying and implementing strategic systems (he wanted a company name that inspired questions).

Ellis, who analyzes and sets up systems for companies like Lee Hecht Harrison, says "The most important thing is to have a basic suite of software applications that multiply productivity." The emphasis is on multiplying productivity. Although Lee has always loved gadgets, the key in business is technology for the sake of the bottom line, not for the sake of having the latest technology.

Back to Basics

Essentials, according to Ellis, would include a word and accounting program like Microsoft Office, an email package, and a contact manager like Outlook or Goldmine that can interface with fax software and keep everything in a single place.

Compatibility is very important, according to Ellis. "It does no good to have a T1 line or high-speed cable access if you don't have the power to exploit it on the desktop." Ellis, who started in the early '80s with a Timex 810 that plugged into his black-and-white television, now uses a Pentium 800 with 256 megabytes to run his Web business. The amount of memory needed depends on how the technology will be used. Word processing requires a lot less RAM than graphics or Internet work.

A Little Help

That said, Ellis is eager to see the day when these basics will be merged with a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA to you) and tied to the telephone. Some, including the Handspring Eyemodule, even include a digital camera. The hottest executive toy this season is the Research in Motion BlackBerry (also known as crackberry because of its addicting nature), which allows users to send emails, access their rolodex and calendar and calculate the tip on a cute little monitor that fits into the pocket. While this could be the beginning of airline reservation desks, stock market traders and a wireless wallet smaller than a Hershey's chocolate bar, who will take the idea all the way is now being debated by competitor Motorola, which recently launched a line of candy-colored Talkabout T900 two-way pagers.

"What people want in their pocket is a small phone that functions as a palm pilot, pager, calculator and Web access. The tools are there now, but it is not as integrated as we would like yet."

Most of the Web access phones out now are pretty simple — weather, stock numbers, horoscope, local restaurants, things like that. These limited, personalized information sources use Wireless Application Protocol (WAP) and Wireless Markup Language (WML), a Reader's Digest version of HTML technology to support the small displays, smaller power supply and limited processing capability of handheld phones.

The key to all of this crossover could be Extensible Markup Language (XML). This text coding is free of the formatting in HTML and therefore can be transferred more easily between applications.

Stop Making Sense

Another gadget that has been two years away for the last five years is voice recognition software that works. "The problem is that you can give it a limited vocabulary and be accurate or program it with a big dictionary and the accuracy suffers. That frustrates people." It has also frustrated the three or four competitors, including IBM and Dragon Systems, that have been working on the software, which could eliminate the need for keyboards, making those "Smart Phones" more practical. The Dragon NaturallySpeaking programs, which are among the best-selling voice-to-text programs, can be customized to fit the user, purchased with special medical or legal jargon or in that most difficult of languages — teenspeak.

Go Wireless

Looking into the more foreseeable future, Ellis says wireless technology for the home and office is developing fast and furiously — so much so that the desk of a few years from now will be completely different. "You will have a flat panel display monitor and wireless keyboard and mouse, giving you maximum control of your office real estate. You will be able to carry your PC around the office and be part of the network.

Locally, El Dorado Hills-based ShareWave (a 1999 *Comstock's Business* Vanguard winner) is on the leading edge of digital wireless data delivery. Bob Bennett, ShareWave vice president of corporate development, says, "We are at the knee of the adoption curve for wireless products." Wireless providers have adopted a standard (known as 802.11B) and companies like Lucent already have products on the market for the business segment. ShareWave, in conjunction with Panasonic and NETGEAR, is shipping wireless Local Area Network (LAN) Technology for high-bandwidth home use to run multiple DSL modems, PCs, televisions, mobile pads, digital audio and video jukeboxes — wirelessly. The company has a new CEO and president, E. Jock Ochiltree, who has 30 years of semiconductor industry experience and took home three awards at the technology show last month.

See All

Another *Comstock's Business* Vanguard winner, Comdex Play Inc., has made a big business out of streaming video. The Sacramento-based company, which was founded in 1994, is known worldwide for developing Trinity, a computer video add-on that adapted graphics for use on the Internet. The company's newest product, code-named S.E.E. (Streaming Eyes and Ears), is promoted as a way to improve corporate training, online customer service, security surveillance, tele-medicine, distance learning and video conferencing. Employees can even watch their children in daycare centers from the comfort of their own desks. Like ShareWave's technology, Play's software will allow consumers to do more with less. "It doesn't make sense to purchase an entire PC for every place you want Internet video," explained Play President Daniel Kaye. "This new line of products will allow businesses and consumers to avoid the expense, configuration and maintenance hassles currently associated with sending and receiving streaming media. We're very excited about the possibilities."

— J.T. Long