

## The Next Curve in the Road by Richard Anderson

In the new business world, the only constant you can count on is that things will change. The world is still shrinking as information becomes easier to share and coworkers can collaborate from hundreds or thousands of miles as easily as they can from several feet. Small businesses and large corporations are competing and collaborating in the same markets. Surviving businesses will tell you that if you are not keeping up with the trends of the changing world, you won't survive for long.

In driving a business, like driving a car, you want to watch for the curve in the road before you have to turn the wheel. Keeping up in business is less about anticipating the change as it is looking for what changes could happen so you aren't surprised.

Recently I was asked, by a very forward thinking client, what to watch for in the next one to two years.

There are plenty of obvious answers: The price of hardware will continue to drop; Hard drive space and RAM will continue to go up in capacity and down in price; Flat screens will overtake CRT monitors; The ability to remotely access email and servers when away from the office will be a "given"; Outsourcing key technologies will become more popular; And tablet PCs will mature into a usable technology.

But as I thought about how to reply, I realized it wasn't new abilities or technologies that were going to have the most influence – the specifics of those change all the time – it was looking at the trends that would have the most impact on our daily routines, regardless of the specific technology. Specific technologies might point in a direction, but the key to seeing the next curve in the road is not reading the signs, but watching the trends.

Here are my answers – the trends and signs that I see pointing to the next curve in the road.

### SPAM

SPAM is growing at an alarming rate. What was once a nuisance has become downright bothersome. In the very near future, it will actually become unwieldy. It takes great forces in the universe to put AOL, Microsoft and Yahoo into the same boardroom - but that's exactly what is happening when it comes to SPAM prevention.

Not so long ago, we could expect 1 SPAM message for every 4-10 real messages. In the next few months, that ratio will change so that each "good" email will be buried by 10-20 SPAM messages. The ratio only gets worse from there...

The problem isn't limited to the time it takes to sort through your Inbox. SPAM itself wastes a large amount of bandwidth – slowing down your network and your internet connection. But, worse yet, Email Harvesting is growing into a true industry. Email Harvesting is when someone randomly send emails to every domain they can, guessing at what names MIGHT be there. ("John Smith", "JSmith", "John.Smith", "John\_Smith", etc.) Every time a bad email address is tested, a REPLY is automatically sent from your email server telling them "this email is bad". How convenient for them. They cross reference the SENT list with the BAD list, and everything that wasn't bad, must be good. Then, they sell those email addresses to SPAMMERS. But the amount of bandwidth they waste on emails you never see is the real invisible problem – almost more so than SPAM itself.

In the next couple years, email management will become a hotly debated art form - most commonly defeated by outsourcing the entire email handling process to specialty companies like MessageLabs or Postini who use algorithmic logic/engines to decipher what is "good" vs. what is "bad". Then, and only then, do they deliver the email to your inbox.

The cost? Pretty cheap. Less than \$3/mo per user and dropping. A pretty low cost when you look at the real return. By using a solution like this, one of our clients was able to avoid having to buy a new server and increased bandwidth, while simultaneously improving their server and network performance.

### Wireless Access

Even now, wireless access is a nice fad, but still not very useable in corporate America. Yes, many of us have wireless networks at home and in the office, but even with 802.11g, the speed is still too slow for hardcore (bandwidth intensive) applications like Quickbooks, ACT!, Goldmine, AutoCAD - and even larger spreadsheets, word processing files, and presentations.

That will change - not because of any particular technology, but because of the increasing demand by businesses and individuals for usable access anywhere at anytime.

Wi-Fi as we know it today is pointing the way. Not only is Wi-Fi getting faster, but two things are happening that will catapult the technology forward:

- 1) Wi-Fi is becoming Wi-MAX, which increases the RANGE of wi-fi from mere feet (or yards) to MILES. That means that, with a few high buildings or strategically located towers, entire CITIES can go wireless. Of course, that technology is new and costly, but with adoption comes economies of scale, and dropping prices.
- 2) Wi-Fi hardware/software is becoming more intelligent. When 802.11a came out it was a joke. Connections were hard to obtain and maintain and speeds were embarrassing. 802.11b helped with some of that and 802.11g made things faster, but the big leap forward came with Windows XP SP2 (service pack 2) - which upgraded the ease and stability of the wireless connection. Add to that the growing trend of building Wi-Fi into most laptops and notebook PCs, and you have a recipe for long term success.

Also entering the market is cellular based high-speed access. When digital cellular became available several years ago, it became possible to connect your laptop through your cell phone. The speeds were ridiculously slow (19.2 Kbs – on a good day) and very impractical. The available speeds have improved, and several cellular companies have now started rolling out high-speed connections in select markets. This technology will enable anyone to be connected anywhere that their cell phone has a signal.

Whether it's some form of Wi-Fi or a growth in cellular technology, wireless connections from anywhere at anytime are on the horizon. The only question is what blend of the two will take the lead.

### Web Collaboration

The trendiness of the web has subsided. Companies are no longer trying to be the fanciest site on the web, they're creating stand-alone strategies and then utilizing the web to help support those strategies. This is a subtle shift...but notable. Let me clarify.

In the past, everyone knew they needed to be on the web, but didn't know why. So they did whatever they could and spent whatever they needed to spend without worrying so much about ROI or measurable results.

Now, before investing thousands of dollars and hours of time into website development and maintenance, companies have gone back to the strategy room to ask, "what do we need to do to move to the next level, how will we know when we get there (or when we're off course), how can we leverage ALL of our resources, including the web, to make this all happen?"

The fly-by-night web developers and the home-based web design cottage industry will be LOST if they don't ask the question, "WHY?" In other words, if the developer doesn't know WHY the site is being built and WHAT it will help accomplish and HOW the success will be

measured, then they are destined to be associated with a project that will ultimately be viewed as an expense, instead of an investment.

What are companies who ask themselves these questions discovering they need and want?

CUSTOMER involvement; improved EFFICIENCIES; real-time COMMUNICATION; knowledge sharing... All the things that make up WEB COLLABORATION.

The concept of the virtual office may finally become a reality. Already, many companies are discovering that a geographically diverse workforce has payoffs. In the new and smaller world, it often makes sense to have your main business office, warehouse, and operational center in different cities depending on the cost and proximity of the services those areas need – available and affordable labor, land costs, infrastructure, or tax incentives for example. Cities, states, and even countries are now positioning themselves to attract a specific niche, and the smart business is using that to its advantage by placing its major functional areas in places that support them the best.

Collaboration, shared information sources, communication portals, and a host of other concepts are going to be the key to keeping this diversified structure functioning. People will need to be able to work together from thousands of miles as well as they could from the next room.

Collaboration and shared workspace technology such as Microsoft's SharePoint, a technology that's been overlooked for a couple of years, will become mission critical technology to many businesses.

Companies that view their website as an online brochure will discover that the true power is in developing a real way for customers, employees, vendors, and partners to interact and communicate efficiently and effectively.

Software and solution providers are developing similar tools and capabilities, and very soon "meeting" on the web will be as common as "meeting for coffee". Entire contracts will be negotiated, blueprints finalized, speeches written and debates won without ever meeting face-to-face.

#### VOIP and Communication Technology Integration

Telecom companies have already realized that there is a major shift happening in the industry.

The big buzz right now is in VOIP. Cable companies are starting to offer it, cell phones are starting to leverage it and even Ma Bell and her offspring will convert in the next several years with tangible deliverables even sooner. Voice-Over-IP is the act of calling someone else OVER THE INTERNET by using a PHONE. There are companies who outsource helpdesks abroad who are already saving millions of dollars in long-distance calls by using VOIP.

No, it isn't a perfect technology and latency (delays sending/receiving voice transmission over long distances) is still a problem, but the internet is getting faster and the cost savings are tough to ignore.

This trend towards integration of communication mediums will reach into both the business and personal world in ways that even the dreamers haven't yet fathomed. VOIP is pointing the way, and you can see it in the scramble of companies to define themselves.

Hardware vendors and software vendors are grabbing hold of this silver bullet and racing for the finish line to see who can get the most market share the fastest. Microsoft aims to incorporate an entire PBX system into its back office (Exchange) environment and several full-featured LINUX-based solutions are ALREADY AVAILABLE to harness the power of VOIP.

But that's just the beginning. The lines between methods of communication – Email, Cell Phones, Office Telecom, Fax, Live Video, On-line Chat, etc. – will become blurred. Most companies in these industries are already struggling to figure out what they need to do to stay in the market. For other businesses, this means a confusing host of options, and a growing understanding that how you communicate will be less important than the EASE of communication. Competitive advantage will come, not with a specific technology, but with how that technology is used to enhance the ability of people and businesses to communicate effectively and efficiently.

The Short Answer - It's really just about People

My answer to the question my client asked may seem odd coming from the owner of a technology company, but the major trends in the next several years are going to be about people. The days of technology for technology's sake are over. The most forward thinking companies are looking at technology as just one aspect of a larger strategic vision that incorporates people, processes, and communication.

We work with our clients to help them develop and see the larger view of where they are and where they want to be, and then work with them to bring about that vision – with technology being only one part of the solution.

Seeing the curve in the road before you turn the wheel is important, but the companies that will survive the future also need to have a map of what's beyond the next turn in the road and a clear concept of where they are going.

Make sure you keep your eyes on the road, watch for the signs, trends in the terrain, and other drivers. Don't follow the pack, and don't let anyone else drive you. As the old joke goes – I'd rather die in my sleep like my grandfather, than screaming and yelling like his passengers.

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