

Picking the fruit

Bridgitte Bardot, the former sex goddess of the 1960's once remarked, "it's very sad to grow old but it is nice to ripen". Yet why is it that the IT industry never seems to salute its ripening fruit? We are always ready to talk about the potential in new technologies. We always seem reticent to salute those that continue to make steady progress. The danger I see in this approach is that new products encounter initial glitches. As such, our obsession with the new leads many in business to believe that IT is unproven. Yet the reality is that the world around us is testimony to the many successes of our industry.

We could not get on a plane nor draw money out of bank nor write an email without IT playing its part. Few would argue that IT has not enhanced our business and personal lives. In this vein one such unsung hero of modern times has been mobile technology. IDC's Forecast for Management survey highlights just how widely utilised they have become in this country. In 1996 27 per cent of New Zealand respondents said their organisations utilised telecommuting, 11 per cent employed video-conferencing and barely half (51 per cent) gave their field staff mobile computers. The 2005 study showed how these usage patterns had changed dramatically. The respective responses to using these technologies are now 83 per cent, 60 per cent and 90 per cent.

That impressive take up rate deserves some reflection on the positive impact this has had. Today it is quite common for many staff to spend part of their time working from home. One executive from a major accounting company recently told me of the pleasure he gets from being regularly able to take his child to and from primary school. He may well spend parts of his evening catching up but he recognised that technology has helped him achieve some form of work and life balance. He also sees that this trend should be accelerated because it will lead to people being judged on their outputs rather than their corporate obsequiousness.

In fact developments in technology offer many reasons for these trends to accelerate. My IDC colleague Susana Vidal recently studied telecommuting in Australia. Her conclusion is that fundamental to the success of telecommuting is the availability of broadband communications. She sees that this gives satisfactory access to central computer systems. It allows virtual private networks to be established to enable the office IT systems to be securely dispersed. Voice over IP enables the use of softphones so one person can be accessible via one telephone number wherever they are based. Finally, she believes we are beginning to see the emergence of adequate video conferencing over the Internet to allow spontaneous cyber meetings to be held.

While I am conscious that broadband reach has been a contentious issue in parts of rural New Zealand it does appear that broadband functionality is being extended to most of the country's major towns and cities. The potential location independence that this offers brings with it many opportunities for kiwi business, government and citizens. Business can attract high calibre candidates wherever they are based and also disperse staff by leveraging the more advantageous leasing costs in provincial towns. For governments there is a chance to address the regional problems of depopulation while avoiding the environmental issues associated with urban sprawl. For people themselves there is the chance to get a better work/life balance and to avoid the burden of the daily commute and high mortgages.

CIOs have spent the best part of the last ten years under the financial microscope. I believe we have done all we can for the cause of corporate cost containment. Surely it is time for a rethink on how we can better harness the capabilities of technology. The growing capability of mobile technology increasingly shows us that this fruit has ripened. All that's left for us to do is to start getting serious about how and where we can pick it and fully use it.