

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

The Crystal Ball

By Douglas E. Welch

Making technology predictions for the New Year is simple. Computers will get cheaper while getting faster. Microsoft will own the world. Apple will go out of business . . . no it won't . . . yes it will. Then, of course, there are the usual predictions that technology will either save or kill us as a society and a race. Regardless of where you come down on any of these issues, though, there are a few important things to be aware of in 2003. I don't profess to have a crystal ball in my Macintosh, but I know I will be watching the following issues carefully.

Big Brother

It seems a given that privacy will be an important issue in the coming year. It remains to be seen where the balance will be drawn between privacy and national security. There will be extreme ideas on both sides of the argument and it will be up to you, the average citizen, to try to understand this extremely complex issue. Even more, as high-tech careerists, you will be at the forefront of any discussion. Privacy can be gained through technology, but it can also be lost. You—the programmers, consultants and inventors of technology—will decide just how far someone can see into any one person's life. I can guarantee that there will be many of you who will have to struggle with some very difficult ethical decisions in the coming year.

Ethics

In fact, ethics, both personal and professional, are sure to be one of the most discussed issues of the year. Hopefully, after a year of horrendous business scandals, most discussions of ethics will be in regard to evaluating, not ignoring them. That said, each and every high-tech careerist will be faced with decisions about how to use their knowledge and talents. Will you want to develop military technology? Perhaps you are developing software that allows someone to hide their data in average-looking files? How about technology that allows someone to monitor the books you read or the phone calls you make and then easily aggregate that information, and more, into a detailed electronic profile of someone's life? While technology is not inherently good or bad, it can be put to uses that go against your personal ethics and beliefs. This year will have more of you facing these issues than ever before.

Broadband

As I wrote a few weeks ago, broadband connections to the Internet are growing more important every day. As the size of data files, programs and software updates continue to grow, the days of the 56-Kbps modem should be numbered. There is a grave danger of developing an Internet culture of "haves" and "have nots" unless broadband costs are significantly reduced. Even today I am finding it difficult, if not impossible, to download important security and operating system updates. The inability to download and install these updates, especially Windows security updates, puts individual computers, company systems, and even the Internet at risk.

Employment

Not to be the bearer of bad news, but the coming year is not looking to be any great improvement when it comes to the high-tech job market. As I write, it is uncertain whether the economy will recover to pre-2001 levels any time soon. This means work for Web designers, computer graphic designers, and other "creative technologists" will be scarce. That said, the demand for computer support technicians, network designers, technicians, administrators, and computer trainers should experience a small boost as companies seek to do more with the technology they have instead making large capital expenditures for new equipment.

As I have said many times in the past, many high-tech careerists might find more rewarding and challenging work by developing their own companies. These small, agile companies can specialize in underserved business niches and locales, carving out a small piece of the big pie, instead of fighting for diminished corporate jobs. One of the best methods of doing this is combining your technical skills with another specialty. If you know the law and have high-tech skills, you might be able to sell specialized technology services to law offices. Combining your knowledge of general contracting or architecture with technology could lead you to consultancies with real estate developers or large contracting firms. In the coming year, it will be important to promote and use all your skills, technical and otherwise.

It might be an interesting exercise to take a few minutes and think about your own high-tech prognostications. Sometimes you are the best person to gaze into the crystal ball, since you are the only one who really knows what you want, or need, to see. □

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