

## **Vision to reality**

Back in the mid '90s I visited Bell Labs in New Jersey. We saw and heard many interesting things that day, but the one which has always stuck in my mind is a comment which one of their scientists made as he was showing us round:

*"We design new technology and then we put it on the shelf until the world is ready."*

I think at the time he was showing us a piece of cable that could handle three terabits of data, so you can kind of see what he was getting at! The point of mentioning this is really to illustrate that, when it comes to technology, what seems like a distant dream does eventually become part of our everyday lives.

As a writer in the technology industry, I regularly find myself creating marketing copy about different products and services as if everyone is already using them, when in actual fact they are barely more than a twinkle in a scientist's eye. OK, so maybe that's a slight exaggeration, but we do often write about innovative new technologies as if they are very much more 'real' than they actually are.

Take internet telephony for example, and I use that phrase in the very broadest sense. I've been writing about IP Telephony, Voice over IP and so on for years, yet I made my first true IP call just last week. I guess I might have used an IP phone without even knowing it in the past, but for the first time I plugged a pair of headphones with a microphone into my shiny new netbook, logged into Skype, and had a totally free internet phone conversation with a client in New York.

Given my career background to date, I really should not have been as impressed by this as I was! Which started me thinking about the real differences between the marketing hype and the market reality. I'm sure there are many thousands of people out there who travel the world on business and sit in hotel rooms making free internet calls using a softphone client on their laptops. Well there must be – I've been writing about them for years! But does that really make it a 'mainstream' technology?

The problem is that our generation (using myself as an example here, whose working life will roughly span 1990 to 2030) have gone through a much faster technological transition than previous generations have experienced. Which means that many of us, especially those at the more 'senior' end of the bracket, might have a bit of a problem keeping up!

Going back to that call to New York, if I'm honest, it wasn't a total success. My netbook decided to run an automatic update halfway through and then re-booted itself, cutting us off in mid sentence - and then when we did get back on the call, my client's headset started playing up and I couldn't hear what she was saying. So we ended up finishing the conversation using somewhat more traditional communication methods! Which all goes to prove that it's not a foolproof process, as even when the core technology is working fine, there are other little issues which can still get in the way.

With my first Skype experience under my belt, I suggested to another client, with whom I have a monthly conference call, that we should try doing it over the Internet to save a bob or two. The client in question is not however from the IT world, and when I heard the sharp intake of breath at the other end of the line, I could tell that he wasn't all that enthusiastic about the idea. You see, he works in the construction industry - and so for him, making calls over the Internet is far from mainstream!

I really do think it's going to take a full generation before the mental mind-shift is truly complete. But I'm certain that it will happen. And how do I know this?

I know this because my 14 year old son spends hours on Xbox Live (when I let him!) not only shooting various aliens and zombies, but also chatting away merrily to his school friends using a headset and microphone plugged in to the Xbox. He doesn't even think about that fact that he is using 'internet telephony'. To him it's part of everyday life, and he'd never dream of picking up a real phone and making the call. As far as he's concerned it's just a perfectly normal way of communicating.

And shouldn't that really be what it's all about?

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