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## Living in a world of exponential change

**Jeff Patmore, BT's head of Strategic University Research, discusses how technology is shaping our lives - at home and at work.**



Ten years ago, futurologists were forecasting that by now everyone would be 'connected' and that people would be able to 'work anywhere'.

Most of us thought they were overly optimistic at best. But, in actual fact, they were very nearly correct. Because now, the majority of world's population is already able to access communications technology of some kind and the rest are catching up fast.

We are entering a time of unprecedented change in terms of both technology and the way we work.

Spending time over the last five years on the MIT campus in Cambridge Massachusetts has given me a unique glimpse of what a 'connected' future looks like. Being able to open your laptop at any time and be online is now possible in many UK cities, but something I have experienced for some time and it is life-changing.

Increasingly, business meetings happen in an 'ad hoc' way with individuals coming together, often over coffee, to discuss the latest issues. And today, we can have all the latest data at our finger tips. This interaction has been enhanced by the development of search engines, which allow us easy access to an enormous amount of information both on the internet and on our own corporate intranets. You no longer have to memorise all the facts and figures you might need, your mind is free for more creative and innovative thought.

Another change has been brought about by the advent of broadband connectivity in the UK, with many people able to live the lives they have always wanted. The vision, for example, of living on the coast of Dorset or in the Lake District while being part of a fast moving, cutting edge company based in the busy capital is now possible without commuting every day - and more and more people are realising this and acting on it.

### Instant messaging takes off

While we are not quite connected everywhere yet, people adapt to this, doing e-mail off-line and then 'uploading' when they reach a connection point. Many of my colleagues tell me that this is actually better than being connected all the time as they are not distracted by incoming mail. And have you noticed how instant messaging has taken off in the business community, not only as a way of communicating, but also as a way of flagging that you are 'online' and available to talk. We are adopting and adapting technology, something human beings have always been good at.

What we are currently experiencing is a realisation of 'Moore's Law' with the cost of devices falling at a rate that was forecast but not believed. I recently bought a 1GB USB drive in a UK high street store for £11 and it would have been even less had I ordered it on the net (£6-£7), just a year ago this would have cost around £30.

This reduction is not limited to memory technology, the One Laptop Per Child organisation is disrupting the laptop industry with the unveiling of the \$100 laptop project. I have been privileged in having a beta version for some time and it is an amazing device which works 'out of the box' on all of the wireless networks I have tried. With an internet browser, word processor, PDF reader and multimedia package, not only is it a great device for children, but it actually does most of the things a busy executive needs - coupled with having a screen that can be used in direct sunlight and a battery that lasts up to 12 hours. It's truly a laptop that can be used anywhere.

### Sharing experiences

The ability to share knowledge and information has been enhanced by new web 2.0 tools. One of the interesting drivers of this change is YouTube, which enables users to share their experiences with the world. However, these changes are not confined to the consumer space - businesses are also embracing the tools. It is now possible through the use of a business wiki for remotely located teams to collaborate on a report or proposal in real-time, which would not have been possible a few years ago.

In leading companies these new tools have radically improved the productivity of the organisation, while allowing employees to experience flexibility like never before. As connectivity becomes ubiquitous and communications devices become very low cost the vision of a world where we can really work anywhere, and have the time and tools to be creative and innovative, is almost upon us.

Jeff Patmore currently leads an innovative research initiative involving a large number of universities, institutions and business schools across the planet, investigating the future of information communication technology (ICT).

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