



Report of the Wolfsberg Think Tank "Re-Thinking the Digital Future: Impacts, Trends and Challenges" at Wolfsberg on 1 - 2 July 2004

1. Over 90 participants were at this 2-day Think Tank, which had almost unqualified appreciation from almost every participant.
2. The event opened with Professor William Dutton's comprehensive survey of what the Internet has meant to society in the ten years of its existence and, in view of that, the prospects for the future. He was quietly confident that progress would continue and that perhaps the worst of discounting the Internet is behind us. Discussion concluded that the present Internet is likely to continue to be unstable and insecure but anonymous (which is essential for political freedom). However, it is entirely possible that one or more properly secure digital networks will emerge which will provide the right level of assurance for business to flourish - but without the anonymity which allows political freedom to exist.
3. Mr Marten Hoekstra then provided an excellent presentation "A Wealth Management Perspective on Future Technologies", which was highly appreciated.
4. Further views from industry representatives (Mr Mark Helfenstein from Cisco, Dr. Doug Dykeman, of the IBM Research Lab Rueschlikon, Mr Gilles Lunzenfichter, of Novell, and Mr Tero Ojanperä of Nokia) provided varied and fascinating views of how these companies see the future of digital technologies.
5. Presentations on what is happening in specific technologies that are converging with the Internet (Nano-Tech, Robotics, E- and M-Commerce, Computer Gaming, Adaptive Home Automation) were given by experts in these fields. The most surprising conclusions were:
 - Nanotech is probably going through the initial phase of over-hype;
 - Robotics has developed sufficient machine vision, sufficient machine movement and sufficient co-ordination to have a robot puppy chasing, catching and bringing back a ball thrown randomly. This has enormous consequences for what has become possible for robots to actually do today and the industry is growing surprisingly rapidly in certain areas of application though it is either stagnating or not yet growing so fast in other areas of application;
 - All the technology needed for e- and m-commerce is already here but people have not, so far, come up with ideas for real businesses;
 - Computer Gaming is growing fast and is becoming bigger than those industries that are directly competing with it (e.g. Hollywood-type films, TV, etc.);
 - Homes run by computers and adapting to the presence and choices of the people in them or not in them, have been technically possible for some time but the prices have been exorbitant, and the systems uncoordinated; within the foreseeable future, it will be possible for all new houses to be built with a single integrated system and this will probably become standard in the same way as catalytic converters now come built into all new cars.

6. The ethical, social and political issues raised by these new technologies were discussed, as were the impacts and challenges of these new technologies for business, learning, society and private life. The speed at which things were developing was generally perceived to be "frightening" and "excessive" and there was widespread questioning of whether further investments should be allowed in technological developments; rather encouragement should be given to investing in using the available technologies in the best possible ways.
7. A panel discussion with Andrew Pinder (the UK Governments "e-envoy"), Marc Furrer (Director of the Swiss Federal Office of Communications), and DK Matai (Chairman, mi2g, London) on "Mapping The Business Prospects", provided a ringing close to what was perceived by participants to be a solid, stimulating and wide-ranging conference.
8. Several participants stated that this was the best conference they have been to for a long time. Wolfsberg has therefore decided to build on this theme a similar 2-day event for 2005: suggestions from you for business-oriented subjects and for speakers personally known to you, are welcome.

Prabhu Guptara