

***Introduction
to the Special issue . . .***

Forecasting the Next 50 Years in Information Technology

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Predicting the information technology future? Nah! The great ones couldn't do it. How can we? Thomas Watson, the IBM chairman, said about 50 years ago that "there is a world market for maybe five computers." Ken Olson, founder of DEC couldn't find any "reason anyone would want a computer in their home" in 1977. And even Bill Gates thought in 1981, "640K ought to be enough for anybody." They were all dead wrong!

But the fact of the matter is that many technologists, corporate executives, consultants and academics, have their future on the line — banking on a technology future. A future that seems to offer opportunities for higher risk and return, that challenges us in our quest for sustainable knowledge, and that has as a stakeholder every individual and collective unit of society. These elements the uncertainty, the challenge, and the frame of reference indicate a diversity of destinations into the future. The articles in this special issue epitomize this diversity.

When I was invited by the Editors to do a Special Issue on "IT: The Next 50 Years," my first reaction was that of incredulity — the next 50 years and IT in the same sentence! After some reflection, I thought that this offers an opportunity to be incredulous. And it does not have to be at the cost of insight. As a result, the articles by my revered colleagues in this issue, all of which were reviewed, are incredibly insightful, and very easy to read.

These authors bring a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and insights to their forecasting pieces. Most of them have been pioneers in a variety of IT related endeavors, including reengineering, electronic commerce, ICIS, and future oriented research programs. They look at the future through different lenses, following different approaches that range from scenario analysis to mythological reference; and focusing on information technology and information, to corporations, management, markets, and society.

My initial inclination was to try to encompass them in some overall framework. Mercifully, for all of us, I didn't do that. The articles are collectively diverse, as they should be, and forcing a structure on them belies the essence of the phenomena we are studying. The sequence of

articles is not a reflection of their quality; and, in general, the articles can be read in any order.

The first three articles examine the future, by explicitly grounding it in visible trends. James Short examines two different perspectives of IT, one that involves the tracking of IT developments (the producer view), and the second that examines how social norms affect IT choices (the consumer view). Varun Grover and Albert Segars, examine fundamental and higher order trends of IT, based on the assumption that the cost of digitalizing and coordinating are approaching zero. Richard Watson, Leyland Pitt, and Pierre Berthon look toward history in predicting a service revolution based on addressable networked computers.

The next two articles draw out trends into detailed scenarios of the future. Lynne Markus grounds these scenarios in the uncertainty regarding organizational forms and coordination mechanisms, and the uncertainty regarding the value derived from proprietary versus public data. Tom Davenport retrospectively describes a scenario that depicts corrections to an over-reaction to the technological imperative.

Jackie Swan and Robert Galliers study the role of the IS professional in the 21st century, with the focus evolving from systems, per se, to the development of knowledge by social networking with other disciplines. And finally, Kenneth Kendall takes a unique perspective in the use of mythology and Wagner's opera tetralogy to predict future paradigms for artificial intelligence.

If there is commonality among these articles, it is the fact that the future is potentially exciting, and is paved with discontinuities, evolution, revolution, optimism and caveats. I feel honored to be in the distinguished company of the authors in this issue. I hope that the fun I had in putting this issue together is apparent as you read the articles.

About the Author

Varun Grover is an associate professor of information systems in the Management Science Department at the University of South Carolina. He holds degrees in electrical engineering, business administration, and a Ph.D. in MIS from

the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. Grover has published extensively in the information systems field, with over 70 publications in refereed journals. His current areas of interest are business reengineering, electronic commerce, strategic information systems, telecommunications and inter-organizational systems, and the organizational impacts of information technologies. He has recently co-edited a book entitled *Business Process Change: Concepts, Methods and Technologies*, published by Idea Group Publishers in Harrisburg, PA. Dr. Grover is the recipient of the 1992 Outstanding Achievement Award from the Decision Sciences Institute.