

The Mercury News interview: HP'S 'chief seer' sees virtual worlds expanding

Brandon Bailey Mercury News

But says legal issues need to be addressed. *Article Launched: 07/06/2008 01:39:11 AM PDT*



Fig. 1 - Philip McKinney runs HP's Innovation Program Office, which works... (Special to the Mercury News)

Philip McKinney sees a future of virtual collaboration, pervasive networks and cognitive devices that adapt to their user's personality.

Those ideas will come to market in the next 20 years, the veteran Hewlett-Packard executive said in his keynote speech at a recent conference on digital living, convened in Santa Clara by the Parks Associates research firm.

It's McKinney's job to think about the future. Dubbed the "chief seer" by Parks President Stuart Sikes, McKinney runs HP's Innovation Program Office, which works to convert ideas into viable commercial products. He also shares his ideas in podcasts and a personal blog (www.philmckinney.com/blog.html).

In his speech, McKinney described a process of rethinking technology to change the way we live and work.

In 20 years, he said, it will be more common to interact in "Second Life-like" virtual communities, where people send graphical avatars to virtual business meetings. And we'll have the tools to be always connected - if we choose - to a pervasive digital network.

McKinney expanded on those predictions a few days later, in an interview at the HP campus in Cupertino. The following has been edited for length and clarity.

Q We've all heard "the world is flat." But will virtual meetings remain a tool for business, or will it gain wider use for the home?

A Oh yeah. The challenge that we keep hearing from the marketplace is that people are much more mobile- so how do you stay connected to your extended family?

There's a lot of technologies, but the problem is they're still not very easy to use. My grandmother lives in Cincinnati; she's 93. I'm not going to give her a PC with Skype on it so I can have a video chat with her. But if I can embed it in something else to where she just turns her TV to Channel 4 and she's connected with me in my house in San Jose - that's where the opportunity is.

Another dynamic in the consumer segment is what we refer to as the "gray wave" - people over 55. Many of them are raising their kids and taking care of aging parents. People are seeing early hints of where technology could help with some of those things.

Q You believe companies should pay more attention to this gray wave, that it's not just the young, hip kids who are going to be buying this technology in coming years?

A Right. Everybody is out there chasing the 18- to 25-year-olds. The problem is the 18-25 market segment is shrinking by 6.5 percent a year. Over 55 is growing 8 percent a year. Fifty percent of all disposable income is in the 55-and-older category. So it's not a bad category to be thinking about.

Q You suggest that Second Life-like communities will become common for work as well as recreation. You also said they will need to gain legal status. Why?

A The problem with distance collaboration is: You can schedule a meeting on a particular topic, but you miss out on casual conversation. That's a role Second Life can play. Some companies are using it as a virtual water cooler.

The challenge is when you start creating those kinds of social networks, there's productivity and output generated. But if I get in a virtual collaboration with somebody in another country and we invent something, what creates the basis for ownership? If there becomes a dispute, where do you take that dispute? That's going to have to be addressed.

Q You predict a "pervasive network" by 2025. How will we experience that?

A I'm not a believer that there's going to be one means of access that's going to be ubiquitous. Wimax is not the silver bullet. 3G, 4G, 10G is not going to be the answer. It's going to be a combination of wireless access technologies.

So what's needed, then, are devices that can seamlessly stitch all these access means together. Kind of a first proof point is the technology Qualcomm is delivering around Gobi (a first-of-its-kind chip that works with two different cellular networks). Now you've got to do 20 of those different combinations and you'll start being pervasive.

Q At HP's Innovation Program Office, I understand a third of the ideas come from outside the company. Why do you want outside partners?

A The reason is that at HP, we're 160,000 employees, we're \$110 billion in revenue, we've got 600 Ph.D. researchers in our labs. You could get the false impression that we can invent anything. But there are really smart people outside these walls. The challenge is how do you make HP the partner of choice?

One thing we do is assign a sponsor, one single person to help these outside companies or individuals navigate HP. Smaller companies don't always know who to call. So this helps them present their idea, have the right discussions and then get a clear signal back on whether it's something HP is interested in.

Q One of your tips for innovation is to stay up late, because that's when your filters are down. (The mental filters that rule out wild ideas, which might turn out to be good ones.) Do you still do that?

A Oh yeah, it drives my wife crazy. The idea really is to go back to things you'd do before you were successful, before you learned that you've always got to be on your guard.

Also, if you're in an area that you're comfortable with, the filters get really built up. When I'm forced to think about a different segment or marketplace that I'm not familiar with, it gives you different insights.

The medical industry is one thing I'm involved in now: I came from a telecom and tech background, but I've been spending a lot of time just standing on hospital floors, watching.

Q What are you looking at?

A We don't talk about future (products). But you can look at the current situation in the medical field - where you've got spiraling costs, you've got an infrastructure that is still very paper-based. You can look at incidents of medical errors from bad information.

A third area that is interesting in the medical industry is the wealth of historical information. Can you use it as a data-mining exercise, and look for early indicators, so that you can be predictive and start a process of prevention rather than treatment?

It isn't just, "Let me sell you another million PCs." It's around, "How do you bring technology to solve fundamental issues? Can you come at it with a different perspective?" That's what I'm working on.

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Five things to know about Philip McKinney

FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT PHILIP McKINNEY

1. McKinney was "semi-retired" for almost three years after his former employer Teligent went public; he joined Hewlett-Packard in 2002.
2. He left college without graduating when he was recruited for a well-paying software job at Prentice Hall in 1982. But in today's competitive environment, he advises students to get their degrees.
3. A self-described visual thinker, McKinney likes his HP 2710 notebook/tablet computer because it lets him sketch ideas.
4. McKinney, who credits software pioneer Bob Davis with invaluable mentoring early in his career, says he tries to "pay it forward" with his podcast and blog. Among his tips for successful innovation: "Stay up late. Take field trips. Don't be cool."
5. He hosted three HP student interns at his home last summer and has two staying with his family this year.