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A Culture Obsessed With Time

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SAN FRANCISCO— The most common cry for help these days in Silicon Valley comes, as you might expect, in the language of techno-speak. Ellie Nelson, a human resources executive at 3Com, knows it well because she hears it often from her employees.

"They throw up their hands and say, 'I'm out of bandwidth,' " she explains, meaning at wits end, out of capacity, and out of time.

As the countdown to the millennium begins, many experts believe the intensity of that commemoration - already marked by everything from catchy advertising slogans and television serials to dark discussions of the Apocalypse - reveals a culture increasingly obsessed and stressed with time.

And nowhere is the obsession more acute than in California's Silicon Valley, the dream factory of the products and thinking that to a large extent set the tempo for modern-day living.

"We've become a society of chrono-maniacs. We're obsessed with the temporal dimension," says Paul Saffo, director of the Institute for the Future in Menlo Park, Calif.

With the preoccupation comes a rising perception that time is moving more rapidly, that less of it is discretionary, and that anything less than immediate is less than good.

Regis McKenna, one of Silicon Valley's marketing pioneers, calls it living in "real time," an era in which immediacy rules. "Time is a measurement, it's not time itself. We've given it borders and the more finite we make it, the faster it goes."

Technology's mission, clearly, is to speed things up by packing more functions into smaller increments. Engineers work in fragments of seconds. The result, says Mr. McKenna, is a world in which technology is collapsing time and space, shrinking the gap between idea and action, and the distance between what you want and where you are.

Remember when you had to stand in line at your bank and write a check to get cash? When a sales clerk had to make a call to check your credit worthiness? When cars were for driving and phone booths were for making telephone calls? Remember when you had to go to a bookstore to buy a book?

The acceleration of all these activities adds convenience and efficiency. But no one is kicking back. Experts in social behavior, both in and out of the workplace, see overwhelming evidence that people perceive their lives to have only gained speed and to have lost what used to be called free time.

On the broad question of quality of life, surveys reveal an ambivalent relationship between people and technology. A 1996 survey by Roper Starch of 2,000 Americans found 49 percent saying technology had improved the quality of life, while 42 percent said it had either worsened things or made no difference. While

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a strong majority felt technology saved time, the verdict was split on whether that simplified life or added any greater sense of control.

Speeding up life

For those in the technology field, the speedup is palpable. At 3Com, which makes modems, switches, and other networking equipment, product cycles are half what they were just a few years ago. Hours are long, and the capacity to stay in touch remotely, by e-mail and voice mail, has obliterated any clear demarcation between office and home.

Ms. Nelson says 3Com is struggling to help workers create greater work-life balance, a common theme in the Valley, even as the market demands machinery that is more sophisticated, yet faster and easier to operate.

PointCast, a Sunnyvale, Calif., firm that broadcasts customized news and information to individual computer screens, is on the front line of meeting consumers' skyrocketing expectations for just that kind of technology product.

"Our focus groups show people feel a completely different relationship with time. We've entered an age of real-time culture, where people want answers and they want them right away. There is no tolerance for delay," says Jaleh Bisharat, PointCast's vice president of marketing.

Little wonder that on the job, "time is the No. 1 cause of stress," says Bruce Cryer of HeartMath Institute, a Boulder Creek, Calif., firm that works with a number of Silicon Valley's blue-chip firms to reduce workplace stress. A key part of HeartMath's remedy, a concept that surfaces over and over among time experts, is to train people to examine and take hold of their perceptions of time, making sure they set their own inner rhythm, regardless of the external pace.

A shifting sense of time

Few experts argue that turning back the clock on technology would be desirable, even if feasible. They urge caution in pronouncing our shifting time sense good or bad.

Page McDonald, a Palo Alto, Calif., educator who has spent the past two years helping high school teachers bring technology into their classrooms, has seen firsthand one of the byproducts of society's heightened demand for immediacy.

"Kids today are definitely more impatient about everything. If something doesn't happen instantly, they become very frustrated," she says. But with the right guidance and mentoring, she says, students find technology in the classroom to be a tremendous asset. The key: making sure technology remains the tool, not the content.

While technology encourages a demand for instant gratification, "It's real dangerous to say it's doing damage," says Mr. Saffo. "It's a trade-off. We've given up a slower pace to get more access." His view is that while technology brings more information to our doorstep, it's up to us to fight for our privacy and control what comes inside.

Learning to live with a different sense of time will take time, says McKenna. "Values grow out of the experience of living in a particular environment. This is a very different environment, and it will change our value systems."

Just exactly how is a work in progress.

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