

Automation Exchange

Technology evolution: What to expect in this decade

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Pervasive well may be the best way to describe technology today. Consider, for a moment, a world without the Internet, cell phones or e-mail. It's hard to imagine, even though each tool has only gone mainstream in the last 10-15 years. During this time, we have been witness to an evolutionary wave of ongoing changes. The true potential and capacity of these changes is just being recognized and while its impact on the insurance industry has been profound, it is in many ways only beginning.

Driving these changes have been two key technologies: the computer and communication tools. Together, they've created an infrastructure on which new software solutions are built to enable access to the right information at the right time.

The convergence of hardware and communication technologies has led in many ways to the emergence of the Internet that connects us in ways we never imagined possible. It is one of the drivers that helped make the world "flat" and has given rise to the software revolution that we experience today.

The Internet has become our living, breathing and ever growing encyclopedia and source of information. From the browser, our portal to unimaginable amounts of information, to search engines that help us find the right information quickly, to blogs and tweets that allow us to keep up-to-date with the information that is relevant and interesting to us, and "waves" that allow us to maintain the thread and context in e-mail discussions we have—the Internet is changing the way we do business radically.

Standardization helps us have the same experience regardless of the browser or platform we use. Hypertext Markup Language, or HTML, is at the core of this technology and is a simple language that allows for the dissemination of information easily. It now is undergoing a major revision that will result in HTML 5.0. With this new version, the need for proprietary plug-in based, rich Internet application technologies will be reduced, making it even easier for us to use the web.

HTML 5.0 also incorporates Web Forms 2.0, a specification that will make it easier to capture

data and reduce the emphasis on paper based forms. This is a key feature and one that will streamline many insurance-related processes while allowing the industry become more "green." Forms, a literal lifeblood of the insurance industry, will become easier to create and use.

Blogs that provide regular updates on specific topics and Twitter, a service that allows the delivery of 140 character-length tweets, or small portions of relevant information, help us stay up-to-the-moment on what is happening in the world, the insurance industry and even with clients.

Blogs and Twitter can be adapted easily to help insurance companies disseminate information among appointed producers to alert agents to any changes to their carriers' products or to introduce new products in an instant. It also can be used by the state insurance departments to disseminate regulatory changes to licensees. What's more, agents can use a blog or similar vehicle to maintain closer contact with their clients, providing greater value and, thereby, aid in client retention.

Even e-mail is evolving. Last year, Google launched Google Wave, an Internet-communications platform that facilitates personal communication and introduces collaborative features. By merging instant messaging and "threaded (e-mail) conversations" or context-based discussions that occur in e-mail, this application helps to further optimize interactions. The ability to break up an e-mail into sections that can each become a separate "wave" of discussions and also to combine it with real-time, instant messaging forces us to rethink traditional communication.

Improvements in the technology infrastructure also is leading to better mobility where one is able to leverage and utilize software applications, regardless of location or the device being used. Cloud computing is one example of this trend. An evolution of client-server computing, cloud computing provides for new ways of using and delivering information technology services, all based on the Internet. One key advantage of cloud computing is that it can scale to meet the needs of users. Software-as-a-Service, or SaaS, is the most common example of cloud computing. One example is salesforce.com, which provides

customer-relationship management services online. Another is Rhoads Online Institute's Professional Compliance Requirements Management system. This online service allows insurance agents to manage their licenses, apply for new licenses and renew existing licenses through a single portal. It also lets agents request appointments and track the same with insurance carriers. PCRPM permits insurance carriers to manage and track appointments and terminations with the states.

Smartphones, netbooks and the Apple iPad, a tablet computer, all point to better ways to access information. Cloud computing and web services enable more processing to be performed on servers and for users with relatively thin clients, or, put another way, enabling the user to have access to the right information from anywhere.

Smart devices that connect to the Internet have begun to appear. Examples include: Internet-ready automobiles that are able to transmit not only GPS-related information, but also diagnostic information that can be used to proactively identify potential issues and fix them when one drives into the local service station. These devices also can capture data about an accident, almost like an airplane's black box, and thereby provide vital data that can be used to process insurance claims faster. Similar advances are starting to emerge in health care and in most any area where complex machinery is involved. These technologies are improving the management of risk and will change the way in which actuarial services are performed.

Devices originally developed for entertainment now are connected to the Internet and are being used for training and information dissemination. Podcasts that one can listen to at his or her leisure are a great means of training. Not only can it be used effectively to meet continuing education needs, but it also can be used by carriers to train producers on specialized forms and processes required to market and sell insurance products.

eLearning, the process of using technology and the Internet for education, is evolving. In fact,

one can leverage virtual reality solutions, like SecondLife, as a way to create a virtual classroom and have licensed instructors provide approved courseware. It is even interesting to note that SecondLife has become an economy of its own with its own currency with insurance products being considered to manage risk within this virtual reality. Interestingly, there are discussions among some regulators on how to regulate risk within such a virtual reality.

This is going to be a dynamic decade as we see more and more applications that leverage the new infrastructure we have in place. While at the core, the essence will revolve around access to the right information at the right time, it will be the ways by which this can be

achieved that will be mind boggling. That said, the one thing we can be certain of is the evolution of this technology will improve the way we go about our day-to-day activities, allow us to build our own professional and social networks and allow us to extend the real world and create our own avatars within these worlds.

While all of this will certainly help us to streamline and improve the efficiency of the work we perform, it also will force us to revisit our values as individuals as well as force us to revisit the values of our society as a whole. Harnessed effectively we have much to look forward to in the days ahead. ■

PIA offers social media tools

PIA launched several social media features, in addition to its existing Web 2.0 technology tools, to make finding answers simple, alleviate information overload and help agents keep abreast of the latest news in the industry. With social media, PIA gives you yet another channel from which to obtain the information you need.

- **Twitter.** Twitter (www.twitter.com) has become an important source for breaking news and is a great way to spread information as it happens. It provides "microblogging" services; that is, the opportunity to share bits of information, limited to 140 characters or less, with your network. PIA designated department-specific usernames that can be followed based on individual interests. Accounts are created in the following areas:

- **Resource Center** (www.twitter.com/PIAResource): Find out when QuickSource documents and Ask PIA are updated.

- **Government Affairs** (www.twitter.com/PIAGovAffairs): Keep up-to-date on legislative happenings in your state and access materials from PIA.

- **Education, events** (www.twitter.com/PIAEducConf): Stay in the loop on upcoming education sessions.

- **Communication** (www.twitter.com/PIA_News): Get latest news on PIA and the property/casualty industry.

- **Young Insurance Professionals** (www.twitter.com/YoungInsPro): Updates on news and events from the Young Insurance Professionals.

LinkedIn. A network for professionals, LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) provides a venue to share your work experience with colleagues and potential employers. To access our LinkedIn groups, visit www.linkedin.com/groupsDirectory, and search for "Professional Insurance Agents."

YouTube videos. Subscribe to PIA's video feed and stay abreast of PIA's updates. Take a look at our recent happenings here: www.pia.org/COMM/social.php.

Check out these offerings and more from PIA here: www.pia.org/COMM/social.php.