

## *IT is Not an Age Thing*

I was recently asked to present at a conference, and the organisers asked if I would help them the day before the conference started. Their idea was to offer a workshop to the CEOs of the Fortune500 companies on basic IT skills. I readily agreed to help and was asked to deliver the piece at noon on the future of Information Technology.

I was please to see that more than 50 CEOs had taken the opportunity to be at the workshop. Each one had the personal use of a “top-of-the-range” workstation and there were a number of young, enthusiastic helpers in bright T-shirts to assist as necessary. At exactly 8 o’clock in the morning the first presenter stood up to deliver the first piece. “This,” he said, holding up a mouse, “is a mouse. This is the left button and this is the right button. If you press the left button once it is called a ‘left button click’. If you press it twice in rapid succession.....” I was just thinking “Hey sunshine! These are CEOs of Fortune500 compan.....” when I looked around the room and saw heads nodding and looks of “Hey, I have heard that expression but never knew what it meant!” The boss never gets instruction.

My worry was that if this first presenter had hit the correct level – then my presentation was about to wiz over heads. I should not have worried, I told you they were CEOs of Fortune500 companies, by noon they had mastered the video facilities of the machines and I presented to the backs of 50+ monitors whilst they watched me in a video-window – a very strange experience.

This started me thinking. You put a machine in front of a 50 year old, and they pull up a chair sit down and ask “so what do I do? What happens if I break it?” Replace the 50 year old with a 5 year old and the experience is totally different. No requests for permission, no asking for instructions, just hands on “Hey! Look what this does!” enthusiasm.

It is a generation problem. The 50 year old senior manager was around in the early 1980s when the PC was invented. They were so expensive that only the MD was issued with one and it sat on the desk as a status symbol – but never got switched on. Soon the prices came down and the next level of management got machines, and the MD’s was moved from the desk to the table behind the chair – but never got switch on. Then the prices dropped so that everyone had a machine, and the PC disappeared, “Oh, I have people who do that sort of thing for me.” – the machine never having been switched on. Many senior managers in industry, who have the responsibility of purchasing IT systems, have never switched on a machine.....

On the other hand, the 5 year olds have been surrounded by technology all of their lives. They have absolutely no fear of breaking the machine – after all they have not purchased it – have little concept of value, and anyway you can’t break games machines, can you?

I recently visited an infant's school, and watched in amazement as a 4 year old demonstrated unbelievable agility in moving and operating the mouse. This wasn't a technical task, but a game with rewards of an excited reaction from a cartoon character on the screen when things went well. "Look" she said, "have you seen that if I click the mouse once the little man takes a step, but if I press and hold it down then he takes a step, thinks for a moment and then runs across the screen!" No worrying about repeat character repetition rates here. Learning to use machines for these children is all part of life – just like walking, talking, writing, throwing and all the other activities that we never considered to be "learning".

As this generation grows up, they are going to make demands on technology and the services and facilities that it offers. They are never going to worry about not coping they will just assume that they will dominate the technology.

The older people are, however, fighting back. Two out of every 3 new start-up companies created last year were formed by "old" people – that is those of 55 years and above. They have taken the early-retirement package but have no intention of giving up. The Silver Surfers are on the war-path.

I was asked recently what would be the one piece of advice that I would give to the IT director of any large company. My reply was to recruit a brand new, young, shiny, IT graduate and just listen! The possibilities in the future are endless.