

The Caring Society

Do you realise that 2005 is the first year that there are more over-65s in the UK than under-16s? The traditional means of caring (extended family, church, state etc.) are beginning to fail. We are just not making enough little people and the ones we do have do not want jobs in the caring industries. Something else needs to take the strain.

We are entering the Digital Networked Economy. Over the next few years we will be establishing new ways of moving information, and connecting people. It will be a time when things start talking to things rather than people just talking to people.

BT's 21 Century Network is one of the first networks that will work in a totally different manner. The old phone networks established dedicated physical connections from one point to another. The new networks will work on IP (Internetworking Protocols) and will digitise information, including voice, and pass it through the network in small packets. At the far end the packets are collected together and the information is re-established. In the new network voice will become just another (and probably minor) transfer of information.

As our population ages there will be a great need for care to be available at a distance. Life expectancies are growing very fast, but the onset of dementia is not arriving commensurately later in life. We are therefore going to see a greater proportion of the population still physically sound but absent-minded. Using technology we could allow them to have a greater quality of life by staying longer in their own homes and supporting them with new technologies and networks.

Simple, and cheap, devices will be needed if the technology is to be fitted into homes. A small pad, for example, conveniently slipped under a piece of furniture, will monitor if a body is in a chair or bed. If there is a body in the bed in the middle of the night – that is good. The same result at 10.30 in the morning could be a cause for concern. At this point the networked sound system announces, “Oh – should I be getting up?” in the person's own voice, as if it was a thought. Equally when the gas cooker is turned on, but not ignited, “Did I light the gas?” This is one occasion where instant intervention is taken by the system for safety reasons.

Similarly, checks could be made on food cupboards, freezers, fridges, toilets, movement sensors etc. The information captured being channelled, probably via a low power wireless network, to a controlling computer. It is quite amazing how we all fall into a comfortable pattern of behaviour within a few days. Current activity can be easily monitored against this normal pattern and exceptions reported.

Simple tasks can be monitored locally, but major differences – total lack of movement, or inordinate flushing of the toilet, for example – would require the attention of a carer. In the old days an automated phone call would alert the carer, who would then have to journey to the monitored home.

In the new Digital Networked Economy, it would be not only possible but also easy for the carer to make a Voice over IP (VoIP) phone call. The new network would not only allow voice communication, but also, as it is just an extension of the packet data exchange, video communication. “Are you alright, dear?” would be delivered to the TV or maybe flat screens on the walls of each room.

Not only physical care but social care, delivered easily and effortlessly down the new always on real time access networks of the future. And the future is much nearer than you would think!