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The Lame Duck Decade: Observations

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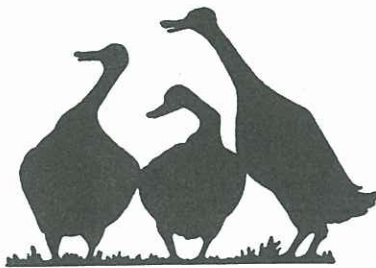
Even during the best of times, the future is an elusive enigma, impossible to define in advance but at the same time too tantalizing not to try. Unfortunately for us, this is not the best of times, but the worst. Counting down the last half of the 1990s, we are fast approaching a simultaneous change of both century and millennium. In the interim, a unique calendar event has been created. I like to call it the "lame duck decade."

In politics, a lame duck is an elected official who has been defeated or has retired but still has time left in office. Like a duck — an unwieldy walker even when healthy — with a limp, such a public person has been cut loose from their normal duties, ties, and responsibilities. They may support and vote for nontypical legislation, ignore their constituents, and spend their time cleaning up rather than performing useful work. At the same time, their position of power has evaporated, encouraging colleagues and associates to turn their attentions to the incoming replacement.

So, too, a lame duck decade is a leftover chunk of calendar, ignored and misused in favor of the unsullied and ripe-with-promise arrival of a brand new chunk of time. With a little more than three years left in this decade, pundits, futurists, and philosophers have already thrown it away in favor of the new millennium, describing that future while glossing over what is closer at hand. Too bad, because interesting changes are nearer at hand. A few of these trends:

People power

Computing capability may yet have a long way to grow, but it has already passed a critical threshold wherein most businesses and industries must computerize or lose their ability to compete. And although some experts have rightly concluded that the cost of computing — including the price of equipment, software, training, upkeep, and repairs — is more than any resulting increase in profits for most companies, few computer users would abandon them, an indication that they must provide some value. But even as computers have crept in and taken over in a wide range of applications, an unusual side effect is emerging: people with appropriate skills and knowledge are increasing in importance. For one thing, connecting customers to services has proven not to be universally computerizable; from bank tellers to telephone operators, businesses require a human presence to deal with complexities and exceptions that comput-



ers cannot handle. Also, people with a wide range of skills — including library and information sciences — may make greater use of computers, but the computers are far from creating obsolescence; they have instead placed new value on uniquely human powers. The solution, is for libraries, and the library industry, to aggressively market their presence, their expertise, and their connection to the established and emerging information technologies. It's not enough anymore to expect the world to find you on their own. One unusual example is the resurrection of a traditional job with a new twist: email secretaries for busy executives with poor computer skills.

Personnel vs. equipment

The conflict between personnel and equipment (mentioned by Corrie too) seems to be happening everywhere, but usually has a different flavor depending on the industry it has infiltrated. The two major differences that this trend follows

seem to be 1) competition/prevaling environment driven and 2) productivity driven. In the first, the culture of the industry may dictate, beyond any one person or organization's control, that one must computerize/upgrade/standardize etc. The *Wall Street Journal* has been doing a good job of covering this, citing research that shows where computers have taken over, but no corresponding advantage has been proven. They're there, so they must be used. Of course, I don't think its so bleak in any application; it's just that people do not have adequate tools — indicators, measurements — with which to determine where they're going, or how fast they're getting there. One new business trend that comes from this lack is being called "the balanced scorecard" (first book on topic out from **Harvard Business**), in which managers are encouraged to develop their own indicators to make sense out of what they are doing. In any case, pretty much anyone who uses one — in the book industry, for instance — refuses to go back to "the old ways," even while carping about the cost, inconvenience, stupidity of the new Internet culture, etc.

There are clearly some applications where computers are the only way to do a job, despite the extremes this might entail, i.e., end of job category. Example: long distance information, now a fraction of the employment base of ten years ago ... operators replaced by voice-recognition

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software developed by Bell Labs. Libraries and information industries are another example here, at least where large amounts of data, data searching, and document imaging is involved.

Libraries, Technology, and the People

Corrie makes the point in her corresponding column about libraries being forced to stick with outdated terminals because of lack of funds to upgrade. Seems like the real world to me, but a damn shame because it was, and is, libraries — academic and public — that give most of the people in this country their first, and sometimes only taste of information

controlled by computers. And while this concept is just hitting the mainstream — through the Internet mostly — it is in the form of Windows and libraries that aren't windows-enabled look old-fashioned, once again. So they are unlikely to get any credit for having been there first, and blamed for being part of the past. The Internet, after all, is invisible and works its magic behind the scenes ... what the audience sees is the format on the screen. Libraries will always get short shrift, because they have had a negative image in the mass market since about the 1950s, when TV arrived to establish a new benchmark for information/entertainment. Here in Denver, the number one library market in the U.S., we have a phenomenal new edifice for our main public library, fully equipped with windows-based PCs. Yet the latest guide to the city issued by the Chamber of Commerce "forgot" to include it. But that wasn't an unusual mistake, given the culture.

The growth of the Internet and particularly the World Wide Web has enabled a significant part of the population to join a network of huge proportions, encompassing millions of individuals and a rising tide of information. For many, however, this connection is as likely to provide confusion as salvation. The democracy with which Internet growth is championed is exactly the wrong way for such a network to be used effectively. When connections to resources and information are so vast, practical control of the system is better achieved through oligarchy or even fascism. Without guidance, authority, reference, and appropriate experience, infinite choice doesn't create knowledge, but chaos. As the Internet continues to grow, the only limit to fools finding facts will be the speed of their modems. And that doesn't include the proliferation of falsehood and fakery. But the Internet is not without rewards.

Renaissance for noncommercial publishing

From self-published books to academic journals, the emerging technologies of high-resolution reproduction and universal marketing through the Internet will inject new life into this low end of the publishing world. Customized publishing such as that currently made possible by the Xerox Docutech (no plug intended) and online marketing such as that provided by Amazon.com (on the World Wide Web) will enable more small projects to survive and new small projects to be created. Already, some online bookstores have reported up to 40 percent of their

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sales coming from overseas, an indication that distribution of English-language publications can thrive outside of their normal market in this environment. In this case, the Internet allows a more efficient distribution of a product whose audience is small and scattered.

Prosperity through diversity

Diverse audiences, in fact, are another distinguishing trend emerging in this decade. People have always been more segmented than they appear, from Elizabethans to baby boomers. Marketing knowledge, an expanding population, and computerization have, however, combined forces to initiate a new era celebrating differences rather than similarities, all driven by the allure of profits. For many industries — including libraries — recognizing a greater number of diverse population groups will bring more challenges and rewards. For example, instead of just an audience of baby boomers, there are at least three distinct age brackets within this population segment, dozens of cultural identities, many unique social-economic groups, and an increasing number of definitive lifestyles.

Independent effort

More work and income will be generated by independent effort in the future. Resurrecting the self-sufficiency of colonial pioneers, independent workers in record numbers are abandoning corporate security in favor of self-employment. Unlike their ancestors, however, the new breed of worker takes full advantage of

the opportunities, tools, and resources of society in order to make a living. In fact, it is the growing wealth of opportunities, affordable tools — primarily computers — and increasing access to resources — including data and information through the Internet — that makes much of this trend possible. Not all of this workstyle, however, has been created voluntarily; another trend likely to expand into the future is the downsizing of traditional corporate mega-employers and the evolution of many former lifetime employment opportunities into flexible, shifting, and short-term jobs. This will forcibly encourage more people to find alternative forms of

work. This may mean more anguish for some, but it is also likely to precipitate rapid change, innovation, and the creation of new products, businesses, and even industries.

Innovation

A dozen or more new designs for mousetraps (based on patents granted in the last few years), artificial testicles for neutered dogs, organic heroin, organic cigars, twenty or more new fat substitutes, a digital nose, 3-D camouflage, and much more. My favorite trend, however, is the continuing adaptation of the latest computing power to the world's most ancient philosophies and occult practices. Astrologers were among the first to see the advantage of computers in their work, but their company is being joined by numerologists, psychics, and other occult practitioners. **Princeton University Press**, not to be left out of this profit stream, will soon release an interactive CD-ROM version of the Wilhelm/Baynes edition of the *I Ching*. A test run at the American Booksellers Convention was used to find an answer to the question "What will happen with book returns?" The result: "Misfortune" and "Obstruction." Other applications of computing technology to ancient mystical practices can be expected in the future. Will we soon see cyberpalmistry and digital phrenology?

Lame Duck Redux

Anything is possible in a lame duck decade. In the words of Virgil: "Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit." (Maybe one day we shall be glad to remember even these things.) 🦆

