The Impact of IT on Our Lives

By Nohara Sawako

How IT Has Changed Our Lives

The impact of the widespread penetration of IT in our daily lives today can be broadly divided into three categories.

First, the diffusion of personal computers and mobile phones, along with their linking to networks, has created a massive change in the way we communicate and access information.

People can make phone calls anywhere and anytime with a mobile, and extensive use of mobile phone-based email allows people to exchange messages wherever they are. The proliferation of built-in digital cameras in mobile phones has developed the exchange of personal photographs with family and friends into a new type of interpersonal communication. In addition, web-based Internet communities are gaining more and more adherents. Exchanging information or advice with people one does not know or has never met has become common today. Interpersonal communication has been revolutionized.

It is also becoming the norm to use the Internet to gather information for everyday life. For example, if you want to take a vacation, you can now book hotels, buy tickets or make train reservations in cyberspace. When you want to eat out, you can choose the restaurant online and reserve by phone. Going out? Just download a map, and get your traffic information or train transfer info off the Web. If you are looking for a hospital, cinema times, news or weather forecast – check the Internet. Not only that – job seekers can search for job openings online. If you want to buy a condominium, check out the realtor's homepage. If you need information about hobbies... the list is endless; for whatever aspect of life one may require information, use of the Internet has become commonplace. The way we gather information has changed considerably.

The second category has to do with changes in patterns of consumer behavior. Internet shopping has become prevalent. Books, music CDs, food, clothing... a huge range of consumer goods is available online. The reservation and purchase of travel tickets and Internet banking have become widespread, and online stock trading is expanding. It has become quite unexceptional to make reservations, orders and payments via the Internet. A new style of trading goods has emerged in the form of online auctions; which allow people to buy and sell all manner of goods.

Third, the widespread use of digital consumer electronics has changed our lives. It is said that a digital camera, a flat-screen TV and a DVD player are the "three sacred treasures" of the current era. While flat-screen TVs are economical in terms of space, DVD recorders have changed the way people watch TV. Since they offer unlimited recording ability, unlike VCRs, you do not need to set the timer to record a program. Without worrying about the actual broadcast time, you can watch programs whenever you want, skipping the commercials and boring parts. If you have to get up for a minute, you can rewind and replay the part you missed when you come back. A completely new style of TV viewing is emerging.

What Lies Ahead?

As there are relatively few household appliances that connect to the Internet at present, we have yet to take the next

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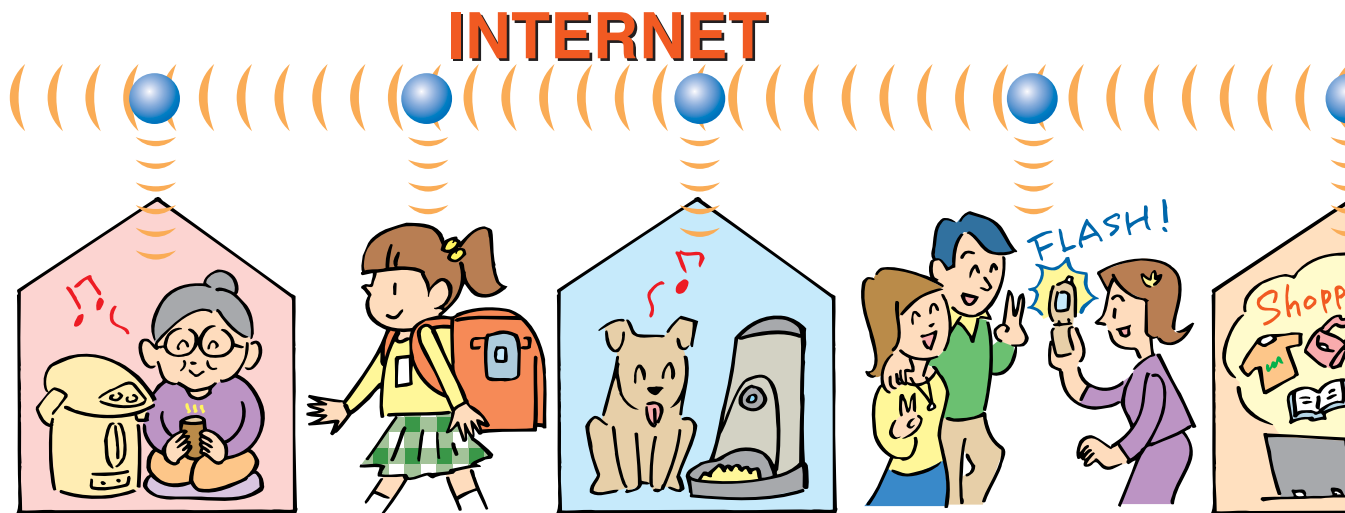
step toward innovative and varied services that far exceed the existing ones. In the future, household appliances and many other devices as well as computers and mobile phones will be connected to the Internet. I believe that the provision of Internet-utilizing services will take us to the next level of convenience, and are known as a "Life Solution" service.

Home info-appliances will make life richer, more enjoyable and more comfortable by offering solutions to the many issues we face in our everyday lives.

Several advanced "Life Solution" services are already on the market. Here are a few examples.

In the field of medical and care services, Zojirushi Corporation offers the "Mimamori Hotline," for families who have elderly relatives living alone. It uses an electricpot with a function to monitor its usage, and the families receive emails to keep watch (*mimamori*) on their relatives from a distance. Not only does this provide peace of mind, but the informs the family of the activities of the elderly – "Oh, she has just got up and made a cup of tea," "Today she must have had a visitor" etc. – enabling them to feel closer to each other. It serves as a new communication tool.

Another example is the "iSeePet" from AOS Technologies Inc., which allows pet owners to check up on their pet, or even feed them, using an automatic food dispenser and a built-in web camera connected to the Internet by PC and mobile phone. It is proving to be very popular to be able to see your pet racing happily to the automatic feeder even when you are out.

Educational services are offered by Benesse Corporation, which provides an e-learning service called "e-Juken (e-Exam)" for primary school children who are preparing for junior high school entrance exams. Having purchased a head set, microphone, web camera and pen tablet, pupils are linked to a video conferencing system through their home computer. The parents of users say, "Children enjoy studying more." Apparently, the service enables them to concentrate better by working on the computer: their on-screen display creates a kind of personal study room, and they are less easily distracted.

Since April 2001, a security service provider, SECOM Co., Ltd., has offered a GPS monitoring service called "Koko SECOM, " using RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) tags attached terminal to track people and items. Users can also call out a security professional in case

of emergency. In the first year of operations, the firm sold a spectacular 130,000 contracts. Another service, offered by Fujitsu, is the RFID tag attached school bag security service, which protects children on their way to and from school by monitoring their entry and departure through the school gates. Parents receive emails from the central computer of the exact times of their children's movements. Some companies offer conventional home security services, in which sensors are placed around the home to notice if anything is amiss. Reports are made to a central computer and security staff are dispatched when necessary. "Self-security services" use web cameras or sensors placed in the home to notify the owner by mobile phone or email if anything unusual is detected.

"Life Solution" services that use home information appliances are being developed for every aspect of our lives. Each service can only change a part of our lives, but as more and more of these are developed, I anticipate that our lives will be enriched and become much more comfortable. **JS**

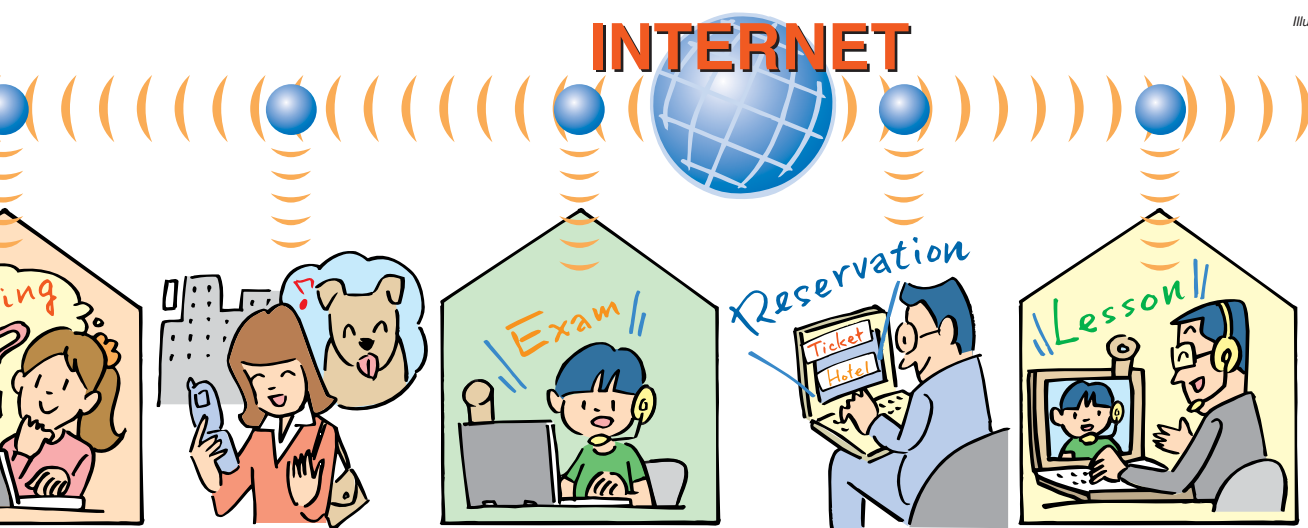Nohara Sawako is the president of IPSe Marketing. She specializes in marketing strategies for Internet businesses.

Illustration: Iwasawa Akio