

Tech has taken off in the past decade

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Monday, November 5, 2007

This column was born 10 years ago this month. When I look back on the questions and answers printed at that time, I'm struck by how far personal computing has come in the past decade, and how much it has changed.

Back then, \$1,500 got you a desktop computer with a 200-MHz processor, 32 MB of memory, a 3-GB hard drive, a read-only CD drive and a dial-up modem. A 15-inch CRT monitor cost extra.

Today, the speed and power of a \$700 notebook makes the 1997 machine look like a Tinkertoy. Processing speeds now are now measured in gigahertz, and chips have two processors. A typical new computer has at least 1 GB of memory, a hard disk that can hold more than 100 GB of information, and a drive that can read and write CDs and DVDs.

The way people use their computers also has changed. In 1997, the Internet was just getting started. There was no Google, no Facebook and no YouTube. Many people were wary of online shopping, and online banking was just starting to appear.

Web-based e-mail was in its infancy, the first high-speed Internet service had been introduced only recently, and wireless home networks were still in the future.

Back then, computer users focused on word processing, spreadsheets and other productivity software, such as programs to create greeting cards - in other words, stuff that you could do without an Internet connection.

Today, people use their PCs mostly for surfing the Web, e-mail, downloading music, shopping online and digital photography. (By the way, the first consumer digital camera capable of megapixel resolution came out in 1997.)

Where computing is headed in the next decade is anyone's guess, but if you look further into the future, you can envision some amazing stuff. Here's an example in today's first Q&A:

Q: I recently got a new cell phone that uses a memory card about the size of a fingernail. The cards can hold up to 8 GB. That got me wondering just how small storage devices - and computers themselves - can become. Is there a limit?

A: Nanotechnology will shrink storage and other computing processes to the molecular level. The real question, though, is not how small can computers get, but how big.

Some futurists believe that it will be possible to create a vast computing network by surrounding the sun with a shell of "Dyson spheres" (thought up by theoretical physicist Freeman Dyson), which would capture the star's energy and turn it into computing power.

Mercury and Venus would be disassembled to provide matter for the spheres, which would nest one inside the other, forming a "Matrioshka brain," named after Russian Matrioshka dolls. The brain would be a computer so powerful that all of Earth's history and experience - including the mind of every person - could be loaded into it.

At some point, the immense computing network might itself become sentient - a "world mind," if you will.

How's that for a big computer?

Q: I just got a new Windows Vista computer. I'd like to transfer my Outlook Express e-mail and contacts from my old Windows XP system. What's the easiest way to accomplish this?

A: With Microsoft, "easy" is a relative term, but it's relatively simple to transfer e-mail between computers using a flash drive. First,

you must make your Outlook Express folder visible, because by default it's hidden. In your old computer, go to Folder Options in the Windows Control Panel (in the Start menu). In Folder Options, click the View tab and select the option titled "Show hidden files and folders."

Now go to Search in the Start menu and search for a folder called Outlook Express. When it comes up in the search results, right-click the folder and copy it to the flash drive (which you've already plugged into the computer). Then remove the flash drive, plug it into the new computer, and copy the Outlook Express folder to the desktop or some other folder where you can easily find it.

On the Vista computer, open Windows Mail (it's the program that replaced Outlook Express), go to the File menu, point to Import and choose Messages. Click "Microsoft Outlook Express 6" and click Next. Make sure "Import mail from OE6 store directory" is checked, then click OK.

Now click Browse, find the Outlook Express folder that you copied to the new computer and click it once to highlight it (but don't open it). Click Select Folder and click Next. Click All Folders (you also can import individual folders), click Next, then click Finish.

Got a question about computing? E-mail David Einstein at einstein.dave@gmail.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/11/05/BUGRT4OQC.DTL>

This article appeared on page **E - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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