

# With appreciation, apprehension

The new BCS Computer City begins to take its first steps toward becoming the first and largest ever one-stop shop for information technology; after the end of a two-week fanfare, newer vendors are sensing an expectant, hesitant flavour, writes A Maher

THE Bangladesh Computer City has started to get into a new groove after serving as a fair venue for three years. It is expected to be the largest one-stop computer and accessories market ever in Bangladesh in the spacious Islamic Development Bank (IDB) Bhaban in the city's Agargaon area. Shopkeepers and officials alike have been feeling excited about the concept of the new market and are confident it will be booming within a short span of time. But there was some apprehension about exactly how far this huge initiative would come off as an array of finer logistics and pricking questions pose themselves at hesitant retailers and IT managers.

One of the important questions in customer's minds is the issue of prices. This future nightmare-to-be was quickly put to rest by some of the more established City residents.

"IMART is a company that sells brand computer sets like the renowned Gateway 2000 series. Mizanur Rahman, an executive in the sales and administration department there, says there is nothing to be wor-

ried about. "Prices will not be higher. Here in the City we have reputed and successful businesses of the computer market in Bangladesh. People's trust in these companies has grown over the years. And they will sell accessories with the same or even at a little lower price than what they used to do."

According to him there was a way of doing "normal" business.

"Some of the smaller vendors in the common computer markets of Dhaka have very uncertain and fragile ways of trade. Sometimes they buy products from other dealers or importers on credit. They somehow manage to sell the goods to the customer and also assure of a one-year guarantee. Small businesses do not have all the monetary resources at their disposal. So how they provide after-sales service - or even a warranty card - to the customers is a question to consider."

What is the difference between the City and other markets? Has there been any change of attitudes of vendors and customers?

Seemingly quite a bit. Hu-

mayun Kabir of Flora Limited, a leading computer/infotech company over the last twenty years, sees only silver linings ahead.

"Now we have a healthier atmosphere of competition. Retailers are more aware and careful to provide service and goods to customers. There is also a greater sense of unity. You see arch business rivals side by side on one floor."

Customers, at last it appears, have some sort of power with what they are purchasing. Not as close to customer rights, but as Kabir explains, an invisible vigilante service.

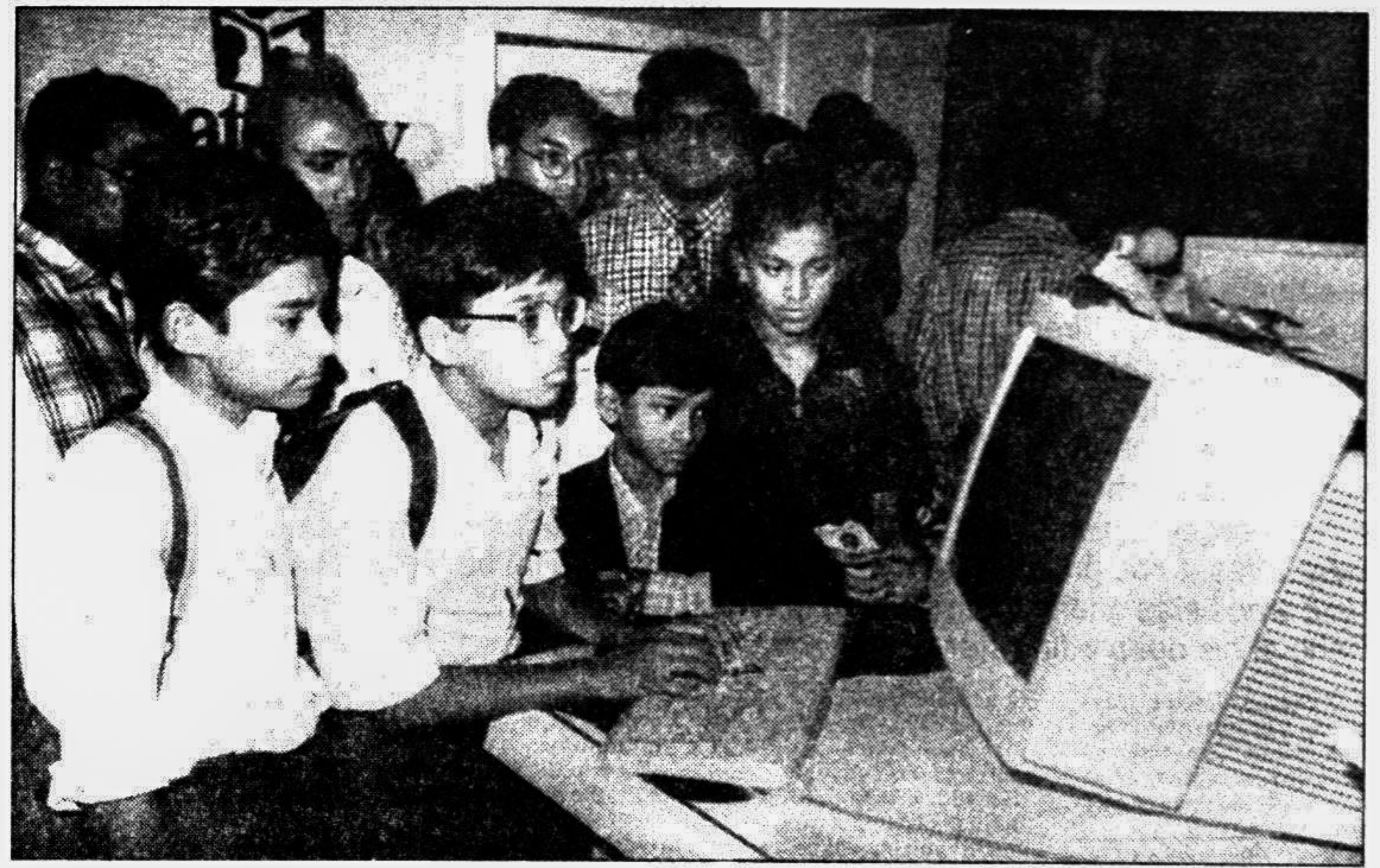
"Yes, now if you want to swindle someone, better have a spare shop somewhere else. Because that will be the end for you here. If any buyer is not satisfied with the service or products they have just bought, they can take up the matter with the BCS office on the ground floor."

What a relief! But only up to the ground floor BCS office. Treasurer Atique-e-Rabbani clarifies, "Well, we don't have a designated Customer Complaint Booth or something of that sort, but we do welcome any inquiries or complaints if

anyone has any. In fact, we mediated a solution a few days back regarding a refund which one company was refusing to give; it was an amicable solution."

Not all settlements are just a few words though and the City seriously needs some watchdog cell for smoother functioning. And regarding functioning and its actual role in the whole undertaking S M Kamal, a seasoned businessman of Beximco Computers Ltd. and the founding president of the BCS, said, "People tend to think that since this is the 'BCS Computer City' we are a monitoring body here and play and exert considerable capacity as a watchdog. Well, we do but that is at a wider and higher level and the role affects the policies we have. Here we do not have such a direct relationship with the vendors as many would like to think. The shops are rented from the IDB authorities by the retailers, maintaining a tenant-landlord relationship. We act as facilitators here."

BCS officials also claimed floor space was cheaper at the City compared to other prime bustling locations like Elephant Road or Paltan areas.



A fair round the year ... BCS Computer City is a logical consequence to the increasing interest among people of all age groups in computers.

Each square foot costs around 30 taka whereas a 100-square foot shop at Elephant Road can cost something like 4500 taka.

One interesting piece of news that had generous circulation a few days back received little attention at the City. It was reported in the media that extortionists from neighbouring areas had approached shopkeepers and asked for "donations". Shop owners and officials alike

denied such issues outright.

"The question of extortion does not arise at all. The venue is a very distinct one - right in the eyes of the public. And security is tight, it is really hard for people like extortionists to get access. We have not received or entertained any such demands. And so the view was echoed. BCS further said that a few local youths from the Agargaon slums had approached them but

it was settled quickly in the presence of police.

An official of Multilink, an agent and importer of Hewlett Packard printers pointed out that one of the main hindrances to a successful take-off of the market was many customers did not know that it was open on Fridays. The authorities had decided Tuesday as the one-day holiday. Instead of the usual Friday, when many shops

in Elephant road and Paltan areas remain closed. Keeping open on this day alone could fetch a substantial difference in revenue. As days pass shopkeepers and customers are becoming increasingly more aware about the breadth and vision of such an enterprise. If administered properly the City could well be wanting to do without a holiday at some stage soon.

# Looks do matter

A dismissive remark about the quality of Indian electricians by Queen Elizabeth II's husband provoked allegations of bigotry. But the British consort's comments drew attention not only to his own shortcomings, writes L K Sharma, but to the image problem faced by Indian science, now a world player in many fields.

BRITAIN'S Prince Philip was being racist and ignorant when he said a mess of wiring in a British factory looked "as if it was put in by an Indian", his typical foot-in-mouth remark also showed that India's brand-image needs updating.

A British public relations company which undertook to promote one of India's burgeoning software companies in Europe found the stereotypical image of India a big hindrance.

Even where India's scientific successes are evident, they sometimes get a bad press. For example, the 1998 nuclear tests were dismissed by the West as an unnecessary diversion of scarce resources by a backward society - as though nuclear knowledge was the preserve of a handful of countries.

The nuclear criticism shows two things: first, those who have the power to tell, continue to project the India of snake charmers. Where once this was used to justify the need for imperialism, it now stems from fear of competition from a modern developing country that has proved itself in many high technology areas.

Second, it conveniently overlooks the way military research fuels science in virtually all industrialised countries.

Successful Indian governments and the country's scientific community have resented by accelerating the indigenous effort. Indians now say they can build a nuclear bomb. The space programme is soaring towards complete self-reliance, but research is not just igniting rockets but also helping poor farmers.

The technological spin-off from research on space or atomic energy is having an impact on diverse areas of economic development. Clearly, Indian planners realised from the very start how advanced countries derived industrial competitiveness from technologies that grew out of military research.

Long before satellite TV arrived in Europe, India built the appropriate hardware and ran a system. India is becoming a major participant in the information technology revolution. Not for nothing did Microsoft mogul Bill Gates describe India as the software superpower of tomorrow.

Other successes have been recorded in bamboo tissue culture, medical and surgical techniques, artificial limbs, blood bags, heart valves, titanium technology, astronomical studies, telecommunications, machining technology, sonars, lasers, biogas, solar photovoltaics, petrochemicals, agrochemicals, renewable energy, microelectronics, ocean sciences and scores of other fields.

Drug company products are winning a market share in industrialised countries. Denied a sophisticated "super computer" by the West, India built its own.

In the 200 years of British colonial rule, India was stricken by one famine after another. Since independence, there has been none. In fact, agricultural production has grown annually by four percent since 1993 - well ahead of the 1.8 per cent rate of population growth.

What is more, it has appropriate technologies for countries which lack scientific infrastructure.

In the face of an appalling imbalance in the world-wide distribution of science and technology resources, India has set an inspiring example over the past five decades. It has shown that a developing coun-

try can leapfrog. It is trying to use technology as an ally in the fight against North-South economic inequity. This is because rising disparities among and within nations mean technology can itself widen existing gaps. The gaps in internet use dramatically highlight this millennium conundrum.

But India still lacks a coherent, co-ordinated national innovation strategy to turn its ideas into products. Though Indian software exports have increased at an astonishing rate of 65 percent over the last six years, the country has yet to achieve an increase in the share of other science-based products in the export basket.

In response, the government is trying to bring research laboratories and industry closer.

The state continues to play a key role in funding research and development (R&D) as the market does only a limited job in this area, though economic liberalisation has boosted awareness of quality standards, more efficient production and sharper marketing methods. The scientific community has become more aware of the needs of industry which in turn is showing some interest in R&D, for fear of competition.

New opportunities bring new challenges. The sudden increase in the disparity between commercial sector and public service makes it harder for R&D institutions to attract and retain talent. Public sector technology development projects are losing skilled workers. The basic science base is weak-

# A new horizon

Electronic commerce is changing the old practices of business as dramatically as the industrial revolution did one hundred years ago, and the benefits to those businesses that choose to get on board now and do it right are waiting to be enjoyed. But first, we must begin to open our minds and broaden the scope of our current markets, writes Zobair H Khandakar

THE Global Market is not a new concept, but a changing one. For hundreds of years western consumers have demanded and paid high prices for products they consider exotic from the East. Ships would sail for years to bring back mere handfuls of rare spices, fine materials, and a myriad of other luxurious products from afar. Possession of these goods offered a clear distinction between the upper and lower classes in the West, bringing culture, knowledge, and status to those who could afford it.

Today, there are many around the world who can afford and who demand products and services from not just their neighbouring nations but those at the farthest reaches. And these demands are being met. Not in years, but in hours. With a telephone line and the click of a button, consumers and industries can visit vendors around the globe searching for anything from perfume to industrial farming equipment. Whether it is the sixteen-year-old searching for the perfect lipstick, or the CEO looking for the best new investment firm, they can find their seller on the internet. Were you there when they were looking?

As we enter the next millennium, the borders that minimize our markets fade quickly. It is no longer enough to look within your country's or your continent's boundaries for buyers and partners in business. Electronic commerce is changing the old practices of business as dramatically as the industrial revolution did one hundred years ago, and the benefits to those businesses that choose to get on board now and do it right are waiting to be enjoyed. But first, we must begin to open our minds and broaden the scope of our current markets. The internet, digital communications, and other technological breakthroughs have made global networking a cost-effective reality instead of a privilege kept sacred for those with enormous wealth and power.

So what exactly is e-commerce? It is simply about doing business electronically. Technology itself is complex and intricate, but the outcome is that it provides users with easier and faster ways of doing business. E-commerce does not change the principles of commerce but rather the logistics of it. It is about reaching customers and vendors anywhere in the world faster than you can walk to your neighbouring business. It is about using computers to sell, purchase, and trade goods and services. Shopping, negotiating, purchasing, educating, and communicating on-line and digitally is e-commerce.

According to a recent University of Texas study, the International Economy generated more than 300 billion US dollars in 1998 and was responsible for 1.2 million jobs in the US alone. There were an estimated 171 million Web users in the world in 1999 and that number is expected to more than double by 2005. Many mistakenly believe the US to be the dominating force in Internet usage, but over 50 per cent of the on-line community generates from outside the United States, Asian, European, and Latin American markets are quickly jumping on-line for entertainment, shopping, and the fastest growing use, expanding business opportunities. It is clear that the

direction of business for centuries to come is into the electronic era. Why?

The most obvious reason for the boom in e-commerce is its cost-effectiveness combined with hugely increased markets. Your company's web page can be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week for in excess of 171 million internet users to see. The initial investment of a few hundred to a few thousand dollars for design and implementation is negligible when you consider the expanded business opportunity. One large newspaper ad targets a small number of people for a short period of time. If you ran that ad in every edition, it would most for more in one month than one year of Web page availability would cost. And it certainly doesn't have the same statistical advantage of the internet. Mer numbers, cost and market, tell us that the internet is an invaluable tool for businesses.

Studies show that the majority of e-commerce is business to business rather than business to consumer. Though retail markets are certainly growing on the internet (Amazon.com, eToys.com, etc.), the biggest growth is seen in manufacturing, wholesaling, and supplier relationships. The internet not only opens you to more customers, it opens more vendors to you. The internet has created cross benefits to all business, which has, in turn, made the global market feasible and more competitive at the same time. This competition has created a new energy in e-commerce. Businesses that were once reliant on reputation and long-standing market shares have been shocked into a new era. General Motors Corporation is already feeling the pressure and doing something about it. They have increased and redirected marketing strategies in co-operation with a number of data systems companies to update and maintain what could be a slipping hold in the automobile industry. They have leapt to cover customer service demands more fully than ever because their competition is coming in from every direction now. All because of technology. Small businesses are beginning to grow more rapidly too because of the marketing and connecting abilities made possible by technology.

More and more businesses are taking advantage of the global market. They are no longer limited to their neighbours as customers and vendors. They can now compete and even create small yet increasing threats to the giant corporations by taking advantage of the technological age. The bottom line is that those businesses left counting the cars on the train as it goes by instead of hopping on to see where it will take them will be left standing, watching, and suffering.

Again, some initial investment is necessary. Personal computers, equipment, and installation of communication devices require a good bit of money up front. So what is the advantage? The most lasting benefit to companies that communicate electronically is the competitive edge. The bottom line is that the world is doing business globally, and it is happening quickly. Without the latest technology, your business loses its ability to keep up. Partners in the UK and South America are successful because they can relay information in a matter of minutes. You must be able to do the same or you will be of no use to your customers, suppliers or potential partners. Using electronic advantages in business is fast becoming less a choice of how you like to do business and more as much a necessity as having a telephone.

Along with global networking advantages are the cost benefits. After initial investment it is not hard to visualise the savings that come with electronic communication. Consider what you now pay for one ream of paper. Now think about how many your company uses

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## Test-tube future

Science has helped to make us healthy and wealthy to a degree that could not have been imagined some centuries ago...

Share of world research and development:

North Africa	0.4%
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.5%
Central and East Europe	10.9%
Oceania	1.3%
Latin America	1.9%
India and Central Asia	2.2%
Russia	2.5%
China	4.9%
Japan and South-east Asia	19.5%
Western Europe	28%
North America	37.9%

...there is no reason to believe that the end of this process is in sight - UNESCO

Source: UNESCO

in one day. One week. One month. One year. If you can cut that number by even half, you have paid for most of your initial investment. Especially when you consider seemingly trivial expenses such as pens, pencils, paper clips, staples, copy machine supplies, folders, and time. When added together for an entire year, you can see how costly those "minimal" expenses are to you. E-mail alone has been saving companies millions of dollars because of time and supplies saved. It takes approximately 30 seconds to forward or copy e-mail messages to anyone or everyone in one company. To make 40 copies of one message, send them out or post them could take up to an hour.

Teleconferencing can be done on the spur of the moment while travelling to a meeting could take days depending on location. It is clear that transformation to technology is an absolute must for business these days, so why are some companies so slow to make the change?

Change is not automatic. It requires planning, goal setting, and thoughtful effort to break habits and change processes. People are creatures of habit and are understandably way of that which is new or which they do not understand. It is instinctive. Many are afraid of relying on technology. What if it fails? With every new venture there is risk; if one is afraid of risk, then he is, by default, afraid of success. Many questions of security and logistics have been raised and answered. And the answer is that we must trust ourselves as we have always had to do in business. We must trust that we will make decisions and act using logic and common sense. We exercise healthy cynicism and trust at the same time in order to succeed. This is certainly not the first time we have had to place faith in machines and the people who make and operate them. When the first railroad train was produced, people were afraid to ride in it for fear that the human body would implode if it travelled over forty miles per hour. We now laugh at old notices such as these. So we must trust that e-commerce is succeeding and work to succeed with it, using it.

Along with our innate fear of change comes another instinct - the drive to succeed. To win. And this is the instinct we need to bring to the front to push us toward change. In order to implement change successfully, leaders need to make goals clear to everyone responsible for moving a company forward. Leaders need to believe in the long-term benefits of adapting and changing and remind their teams of the rewards constantly. Leaders need to motivate by example. So it's time for all of us to lead our communities successfully into the 21st century. E-commerce is now the way of global commerce, something toward which we have been driven for centuries. The explorers, sailors, and traders of centuries ago set the framework for global profits, but it is there only for those who embrace the change toward technological business. If we do not make a winning effort to change and keep pace with a world that is doing business in a whole new, exciting, and prosperous way, then we will definitely be left behind.

The author is the CEO of GlobalInc Industries, a multi-discipline business entity based in the United States

So how difficult is it to join the e-commerce community? What will initial start-up cost me? Will it pay off in the end? These are frequently asked questions for new internet and electronic media users. Getting your business into the 21st century is not as difficult as it seems. It requires a minor investment in equipment, and suppliers and then, as stated earlier, requires negligible cost for sustaining and maintaining. E-mail alone has saved companies thousands of dollars in replacing a large bulk of telephone long distance

charges. Many one-person operations are profiting from building and managing their own web sites. If one, average citizen can make a sizeable profit selling crafts from home, then any small, medium, or large business anywhere can definitely succeed on a global level. No reward is ever certain. However, if we hesitate now to become a part of the world-wide market, we are saying "no" to the best chance at the best time to reach unimaginable goals in business.

It is clear that the internet has changed the direction of business, directing us toward global markets and expanded opportunity. We are now enabled to expand our businesses and our profits immeasurably, and the best advantage is that we can do it cheaper than ever before. It is also impossible to believe that business can increase marketing, customer bases, and supplier connections, while actually decreasing investments, but electronic media has made it a reality. However, businesses need to begin making a directed, conscious effort toward electronic communication and practices.

To enter the global market successfully, companies need to begin taking their own offices and industries into the electronic communication age. Post-it notes, paper memos, cork bulletin boards, envelopes, stamps, flip calendars, desk calendars, wall charts, and Xerox machines are becoming obsolete. Messages, memos, mail, presentational material, organizers, and planners can all be used with a computer. Instead of making 30 paper copies of one memo, you can send 30 messages via e-mail. Instead of handing out a thick stack of visuals to every member of an audience, you can reach them more effectively with a graphic presentation. Instead of paying travel expenses for 10 people to come together for a meeting, you can instantly communicate through teleconferencing or video conferencing. These forms of communication are becoming the way because they are cheaper, faster, sometimes more reliable, and often more effective than what is quickly becoming the "old way" of doing business.

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