Upfront Interview

John Patrick: the fine art of blogging

John Patrick is a founding member and chairman of the Global Internet Project and a founding member of the World Wide Web Consortium at MIT. He led IBM’s charge into e-business. After 35 years with IBM, where he was chief Internet technology officer, Patrick is now a speaker and author.

How would you describe yourself?
I am not a consultant, that’s not my thing. I like to write and speak and participate on boards so I would describe myself as an author, lecturer and hobbyist. I love technology. I like acquiring it. Look at this digital camera I have just bought. It’s Japanese – called “Che-ez!” – you wear it around your neck, it’s very small and has a USB connection. So I like to fool with technology.

The thing I’m into at the moment is “blogging”, building and maintaining a web log. It is similar to discussion groups but the best description is that a web log is a diary. I have just written one about a spray paint I bought! People are now making a living from blogging and I think that blogging may well emerge as potentially the primary source of published material. That’s radical but possible.

So, I enjoy communicating, sharing experiences and over the years I’ve learned to communicate fairly well, I think.

Some people have a passion for golf, I don’t. I would just as soon be doing something with my computer. I don’t see emails as work. It is communicating with people so I don’t bother to measure how much time I spend answering emails.

The thing I don’t enjoy is spam. It is now encroaching on our personal lives in a very offensive way. People are stealing our time and I’m very concerned about this.

I hope that the only answer isn’t governmental regulation. I’m hoping for creative, technical ways to deal with this. The solution, I think, is authentication. Authentication means having a digital ID so if someone without an ID sends you an email the message will be automatically deleted. If the sender has an ID you still know who gave them the ID and then you might read the message. Authentication solves a lot of problems. Authentication is the empowerment that will enable e-commerce to go onto the next step and help eliminate spam.

So you don’t like the anonymity offered by email?
The important thing is that if I can establish you are who you say you are I can establish the level of privacy I want. Anonymity is OK. I don’t think most people want to be anonymous but think of battered wives, for example, who might want and need to be anonymous.

What about issues of privacy?
Authentication would give you confidentiality. Now most emails aren’t encrypted so they can be read. If you had a private key only you

Patrick: offended by spam

can then read your emails. It is time for leaders of governments, financial organisations, educational institutions and other bodies to step forward and take a leadership role. In Spain digital IDs have been distributed to people so they can look at their taxes online.

Isn’t part of the problem that the Internet is beyond the control of a single body or government?
The magic of the Internet is that no one individual or body is actually in charge of it. Instead, there are lots and lots of working groups and standards groups, without which there wouldn’t be an Internet anyway.

There is no central plank on which the Internet relies and without which it would fall apart. There have been predictions of the Internet’s collapse over the years but it is highly distributed. September 11 destroyed important portions of the Internet but it has carried on.

Yet 10 years ago the Internet was viewed with some scepticism even by
involved in a few fortunate things. Serendipity in all this. I've been
a certain amount of luck and
At a personal level, there was a
right time?
You were in the right place at the
wrong

The thing with IBM and the Internet
way of thinking and, in some cases,
Darwinian instincts have caused
them to put up their own shields.

How did IBM come to the Internet
so early in its development?
When Lou Gerstner came along and
saw the Internet he saw its potential. He
is a great communicator and he
saw its power. At that time, e-
business hadn’t been invented so he
didn’t know where the business
opportunity lay but knew that it was
a powerful communication
mechanism.

Weren’t you ever tempted to leave
IBM?
I had a constant barrage from head-
hunters to go to California and run
this and that company. But the best
opportunity lay at IBM because it
has great people and great resources
– you know, it has around 3,000
PhDs involved in research.

The Internet galvanised the
company. There had been a time
when the company had no strategy –
then e-business became the strategy.
Everyone suddenly knew that that
was our business.

You were in the right place at the
right time?
At a personal level, there was a
certain amount of luck and
serendipity in all this. I’ve been
involved in a few fortunate things.

The grassroots proved otherwise.
The grassroots is made up of a lot of
smart people throughout the world
who have a passion for technology
and solving problems. Problems will
be solved by working groups made
up of volunteers.

At the moment the Internet is not as
reliable as the telephone system but
which would you rather have?

How did you get older managers
involved?
One of the things IBM does is
reverse mentoring. A 25-year old is
assigned to a senior vice-president.
Now, of course, people over 65 are
one of the fastest-growing sectors of
Internet use. They have
grandchildren who won’t write or
call but who will send email.

How can you maximise your e-

All the technology and money on the
planet won’t enable you to meet
people’s expectations if you don’t have
the right attitude, which includes the
ability to think globally but act locally,
think big but start simple, think
outside-in instead of inside-out, be
able to accept “just enough is good
enough”, engage in trial by fire,
transform to a model of sense and
respond instead of the traditional
model of plan, build, deliver.

This attitude comes from the
grassroots thinking that was part of
the evolution of the Internet. It’s
hard to describe. Young people tend
to have it but it’s not really an age
thing. The masses of people in the
middle layers of large organisations
often don’t have it. The
bureaucracies of large organisations
have shielded them from the new

What’s the next big thing?
One thing that is emerging in the US
is WiFi, wireless fidelity, which will
become huge. It reminds me of how
the Internet was 10 years ago.

The last mile is getting high-speed
connections into the home. Now you
don’t need to involve the phone or
cable company, you can do it
through wireless. Community-based
wireless access is emerging.

I can feel the grassroots nature of
what’s taking off. People are making
antennae from a Pringles can and the
putting it on the roof of their
buildings. These things have a range
of a few miles and mean that people
can use the broadband technology
used by their employers when they’re
at home.

I was in a sandwich shop in a small
town in Connecticut and wondered
if there were any wireless networks
in the air. There were and I was
soon connected at 1.3 million bits
per second. I don’t know where the
signal was coming from but I was
connected and didn’t have to pay.

When CIOs hear this they shudder.
They say it’s insecure, unreliable –
the same list as 10 years ago when
they were talking about the Internet.

We are on the verge of a new era for
the Internet that’s as big and exciting
as the first. It will have seven
characteristics – fast, always on,
everywhere, natural, intelligent, easy
and trusted. The pace is accelerating
with more competition, fewer barriers
to entry and high expectations. At
the moment we are only five per cent
into the Internet’s ability.

Interview by Stuart Crainer

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