

Brave New Workplace: A More Realistic New Year

By Richard Florida

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The new year will see the return of the 'bricks'--those stodgy Old Economy companies once written off as dead

In one of my favorite late-night comedy routines, Conan O'Brien and sidekick Andy Richter would sit with the lights dimmed and flashlights held under their chins, and offer various wacky prognostications as background voices ominously chanted "In the year 2000..."

Well, here are my favorite nuggets, replayed from that year.

Just a year ago, as midnight approached, millions of people held millions of champagne glasses--and also held their breath, wondering if the Y2K bug would turn the lights out and the computers would fail. They didn't.

The Super Bowl telecast on Jan. 30, 2000, carried commercials for 17 Internet companies--some of which hadn't existed a year or two before, but now had enough investment backing to purchase the most expensive airtime in the world. Before the year was out, many of them went bust.

The Internet even had a poster boy: a 26-year-old former systems analyst who had legally changed his name to DotComGuy. His Web site logged a mind-boggling 10 million hits on New Year's Day alone. DotComGuy would live the entire year in his house, surviving on goods and services ordered over the Internet. Look for him to turn up alongside some long-lost '60s and '70s rock icons on another of my favorite TV shows, VH1's *Where Are They Now?*

A "Silicon Valley psychic" quoted in the *InformationWeek* New Year 2000 issue calmly predicted, among other things, that "dot-coms will continue to be the darlings of investors" and that "IPOs for dot-com startups will continue to be red-hot--there won't be any reversal this year." Impound her crystal ball.

With the Nasdaq suffering about its largest loss in history (more than 35%, as I write this), dot-com layoffs escalating, and even once tried-and-true tech stocks bouncing lower and lower, the outlook for 2001 is decidedly more realistic. *Wall Street Journal*

new economy columnist Kara Swisher recently joked that she's considering changing the name of her column from "Boom Town" to "Gloom Town."

As I see it, there appear to be four big influences for this new year:

Back to reality: We're headed there, after the gold-rush mentality of the past several years. More dot-coms and fly-by-night companies are headed for the dustbin of history. The carnage will continue to mount in the Internet and related sectors, particularly consulting and services. Things will get worse, possibly a lot worse, before they get better.

Balance: Count on the new president, George W. Bush, to set the tone here. He's not just a "uniter," he's a balancer who prefers delegating to doing as he tools around his ranch. What a change from the go-go, workaholic, constant campaign years of Bill Clinton. The new year will see more and more of us bailing out on round-the-clock workdays and the 24-by-7 time warp, perhaps following the new president, who says he likes to knock off at 5 p.m., spend weekends at the ranch, and take a couple of hours each day to exercise or maybe even take a nap.

From clicks to bricks: The new year will see the return of the "bricks," those stodgy old economy big companies once written off for dead. Growing casualties in the Internet and related sectors will help these behemoths come barreling back, sweeping up great technology at bargain-basement prices and offering "balance" to IT workers who have had it with startup chaos and life in the Dilbert zone.

The Chad2K crisis: The election boondoggle of dimpled, pimped, and crimped chads may turn out to be the best thing to happen to the IT sector in quite a while. Count on the political losers of 2000, Al Gore, Bill Bradley, and John McCain, to lead a growing chorus of voices calling for not just election reform and online voting but a sweeping move to E-government. With the Congress split and little possibility for a large tax cut, what better way to unite the nation than to devote a good chunk of the surplus to taking government from the 19th to the 21st century in one giant, IT-sector-stimulating swoop. Think of it as a new economy stimulus package.

So, click on your computer's solitaire program (one of "Dubya's" favorites) or call up a favorite game on your handheld, grab a beer from the 'fridge, and chill.

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