by Jill Barson Gilbert

A Journey through Time

A long, long time ago, BC (Before Computers), in galaxies far away (Houston), I worked as an environmental specialist in industry. Later, I began my second career at an environment, health, and safety (EH&S) management consulting company. In the mid-1980s, someone "discovered" the personal computer (PC). The only people lucky enough to have PCs were the company bookkeeper, the chief financial officer, and the person who ran air dispersion models—it was thought that PCs made engineers, scientists, and MBAs look too much like clerks. However, it was not too long until IBM, Microsoft, and Apple let other companies build replicas of the PC—send in the clones!—and I was lucky to acquire one of only two IBM clones in the company.

My relationship with the PC was good. I taught myself lots of things. I found value in using the computer to manage projects using simple spreadsheets and written documents.

Soon laptop computers emerged. After managing a large, complex EH&S due diligence project, the company awarded me with the use of a laptop computer. It had a 20-Megabyte hard drive and weighed 20 lbs! I cannot imagine using such a computer today, considering that technological advances now allow me to carry a lightning-fast 4-lb notebook computer with a 200-*Giga*byte hard drive.

THE DARK SIDE

When the EH&S consulting firm downsized, I moved to the "Dark Side," launching my third career in software product management at a giant software firm. I almost didn't get the job because I wasn't technical enough. This made no sense to me. After all, I was raised by geeks and had plenty of math and science experience. But I couldn't speak the language—when the software giant said "technical," it meant Information Technology (IT). Eventually, I learned the language and became a translator between the software developers and users. I wrote several white papers and made presentations on technology, software, and IT issues, especially as they related to EH&S issues. The Dark Side was good.

The software giant sold its EH&S business and I ended up as an EH&S technology consultant. My years there helped me learn about many aspects of the software and IT businesses. I wrote many more papers and started writing this column. This effort not only made me learn a lot, but it also helped influence and educate thousands of non-IT professionals.

9/11 CHANGES THINGS

The technology consulting group grew at a quick pace. Then 9/11 came. After 9/11, the business took a nosedive as companies delayed discretionary software projects. By March 2002, our company had out-placed 30 people and we thought that things were getting back to normal. When my position was eliminated, it was an easy decision to start my own business. The combination of EH&S experience in industry, management consulting, software product management, and implementation, as well as strategic planning and marketing, provided me with a firm foundation. I had a good network of contacts, especially within A&WMA and the EH&S profession.

IT TIME TRAVEL

Without a doubt, we have traveled through time and have witnessed many IT milestones, each more spectacular than the last. IT inevitably shapes our lives. Just look at the events in the past 20 years: the emergence of hardware such as PCs, cell phones, PDAs, and BlackBerrys; software's journey from mainframe to PCs to client/server to the Web; and the advent of the Internet, digital data transmission, satellites, and wireless networks. These technologies all facilitate global human-to-hardware interaction. Even more exciting, the emergence of wikis, blogs, and social networking opens a new dimension of human-to-human (via technology) interaction.

As we continue to travel through time, we will be surprised and delighted by technologies still to come. We will embrace some technologies and reject others.

AN ENDLESS JOURNEY

IT has made a permanent impression, letting us accomplish things in ways we never imagined. Today, IT is an industry that has created new opportunities, fostering global communications and global markets. IT allows us, as EH&S professionals, to communicate with colleagues in far-flung locations, easily manage information, and share knowledge.

IT opened up a new world of opportunity for me, personally and professionally. When I graduated from college, I never would have dreamed that I would be working on the types of things I do today—because none of this existed!

My journey includes several EH&S and IT disciplines. IT time travel keeps me fresh and enables me to span traditional generational, business, and social boundaries. I feel younger than many of my contemporaries. **This journey** has a beginning, but its end is not yet known.

To be continued… **em**

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