ANOTHER SPLENDID YEAR

As I reflect on the Alumni Association’s activities over the past 12 months, I believe we can be proud of our achievements. Through the great efforts put in by fellow members and the Board of Directors, we fulfilled our goal of providing more networking opportunities and benefits; we promoted the Alumni Association’s visibility among current students in order to ensure a vibrant alumni programme in the future; and we remained one of the most active and supportive alumni associations on the HKU campus.

For the year 2006-2007, the Association hosted and sponsored a number of events, expanded the range of benefits and services, participated in experience sharing with new students, and introduced new initiatives. Below are some of the highlights.

NETWORKING EVENTS

- Luncheon (August to September 2006)
- Happy Hour (September 2006 to June 2007)
- Dinghy training (October to November 2006)
- SIG Sports seminars (October to December 2006)
- Professional Development seminar on Program Trading (December 2006)
- HKU Marathon Team for the Standard Chartered Marathon 2007 (4 March 2007)
- Cross Country & Family Fun Run (April 2007)
- Annual event - BBQ at Aberdeen Boat Club (26 May 2007)

MEMBER BENEFITS AND SERVICES

We worked hard to expand benefits and services to our members. Major offers introduced this year include:

- Stress tests special offer for HKU Marathon Team members running at the Standard Chartered Marathon, and
- Access to external professional seminars at discounted price.

Apart from the above, we continue to offer members:

- Free web-based email account with 30MB of storage,
- Free access to current lecture notes of the MSc programme,
- Continuing professional development opportunities at privileged rates on current course modules and professional lectures,
- Career opportunities postings, and
- Mentoring for students.

CONNECTING FELLOW ALUMNI WITH NEW STUDENTS

At the invitation of the Programme Office, Association members have an enjoyable time sharing experiences with new students at the Welcoming Reception for New Students and at the 2006 Graduation Dinner. They were great ways to connect fellow Alumni with new students.

2006-2007 PRESIDENT’S OUTSTANDING SERVICES AWARD

As my term of Presidency draws to a close, I want to take this opportunity to recognise and acknowledge those members who have rendered outstanding services to the Alumni Association. It was with great pleasure that the 2006-07 President’s Outstanding Services Award was presented at the annual event on 26 May 2007. I extend my congratulations and heartfelt thanks to these four members:

- Patrick Chan (VP, Membership) - who was instrumental in securing major sponsorship for the HKU Marathon Team.
- Denny Ma – for his strong commitment to members’ benefits.
- Angela Pang (VP, Student Affairs & Programme Office Liaison) – for her outstanding services in supporting the Association’s activities.
- Michael Tsui (VP, Social Activities) – who spearheaded a wide variety of social activities for the Association.

MEICOM CONNECT

At the invitation of the Programme Office, the Association jointly published the Meicom Connect newsletter twice a year. The first issue was in December 2006. I encourage all members to contribute to the newsletter. The editor would welcome your article, be it long or short.

LAPEL PIN

In appreciation of the members’ support and to help promote the continual presence of the Association, we are going to present a stylish lapel pin to members free of charge. Please send us your up-to-date contact details (name, postal address, email address and contact phone number) so that we can update our address database.

Last, but not least, the Association cannot be as effective as it has been without the dedication of the Programme Office and your continual support. I am truly grateful and I am sure the new Board of Directors will appreciate your continuing support. My best wishes to you and your family for a healthy and successful future.

Leititia Ngan
President 2006-2007
MEICOM Alumni Association
AN EXPANDING NETWORK

Getting an invitation to review the programme’s curriculum brought back some memories of when I joined the programme. In late 1999, like many Hong Kong people, I was in stock speculation on the dot com boom, undertaken in addition to my day-job as a banker. I thought I would have even better trading results if I knew more about the so-called e-commerce. This was frankly the key driving force in my application to join the MSc(ECom&Comp) programme in 2000.

The enrolment at that time was very competitive as the programme was the first one launched in 1999 in Hong Kong, and the second one launched in the world (after Professor Shamos’ in Carnegie Mellon). Anyone from anywhere can interrupt me for anything but I log into the computer system and my six “persistent” IM chat rooms start up automatically, along with my Blackberry and ten little windows that show my colleagues working in Singapore and Tokyo. Our IM (Instant Message) chats don’t just allow text chats; the same channel offers VoIP as well. Anyone in the organization could also ask me a question or talk to me via multiple channels and in multimedia: visual, audio and text. I sit out in the open as no one has private offices in our company. Then again, private offices are anything but private in this day and age. Anyone from anywhere can interrupt me anytime and in any way they want. Oh, did I mention the speaker box on my desk that is connected to a worldwide “squawk” (voice) system and the more traditional overhead “public announcement” system that we are so fond of using?

We are in the information business and information travels fast and frequent in the company. We are constantly interrupted by multiple channels of communications from colleagues who want and expect instantaneous responses. While the speed is exhilarating and tasks get completed quickly, it is difficult when we need to write an evaluation, to develop a new plan or to flesh out a new idea. To do anything that requires more than five minutes of attention is often a challenge in Zen concentration. In fact, it is tempting to give up thinking altogether when it is easier to shoot off a message to ask someone else. At the same time, since we know conversations on electronic mediums are kept for posterity, we tend to give the safest answer possible and sometimes with a few lines of legalese mixed in. When interactions with colleagues become fragmented, transactional and stifled, opportunities for discussions and creative thinking are lost.

As modern corporations race to embrace modern communication technology, this dissociation threatens to extend to client-business interactions as well. Clients are offered the use of online self-service systems, online manuals, context sensitive help, emails, electronic voice menus and IM chats by way of support. The last time I saw a bank teller must be about six months ago. Interactions between clients and their customers therefore also threaten to become fragmented, transactional and stifled. CRM systems (Client Relations Management) promise to help, but a vast database of fragmented interactions doesn’t change the fact that they are still transactional and can easily be commoditised.

People do business with people they like. In this highly computerized world of ours, the value of a genuine smile is on a steady up-trend. Our ability to interact with each other and to form relationships with a colleague or a customer is the key advantage that cannot be commoditized away. We are what we are, and we are unique. One of our company’s key competitive advantages is that they have us, and there’s only one just to go around. As clients, we all want attention, we all want to be treated as unique human beings that we are. The two questions most of our customers send to us everyday are: Do you hear ME? Do you understand what I want?

So, do not let the advent of technology dictate our agenda. Technology should not enslave us in small commoditized confines. Technology should free us up to be more human. As corporate employees, all our communication devices do not have to be on all the time. We do not have to read and respond to every single email immediately upon receipt. We do not have to jump every time our Blackberry beeps or when our IM agent flashes. We can check our communications at regular intervals and struggle to give ourselves time to think, to create and hence to do what humans do best. We can get off from our desk, walk over and talk to our colleagues in person. We can have conversations over coffee or lunch. By the same token, we can afford to be more human on emails and IM chats with our clients. We can let our personalities show (God forbid!). We can get off the “email trap” and pick up the phone and talk to our clients instead. We can visit our clients, break some bread and share some jokes. Our competitors might have the same technology that we have, but they don’t have us.

They don’t have us.

Technology properly to free us up to be humans - to inspire, to create and to foster relationships. That perhaps is the real winning strategy in this competitive digital world.

Jackson C.S. Kwan
2006 ECOM Graduate
http://www.linkedin.com/in/jacksonkwang
Should computers be used for voting?

I have been involved in computerized voting systems for 27 years, having been an official examiner of electronic voting systems for various states since 1980, conducting more than 120 such examinations, and testified on voting issues before the U.S. Congress four times and before state legislatures five times. So I have learned a few things. First, computers afford the most secure method of voting ever developed, and computers can guide voters through the process of voting far better than any instructions that might be printed on a paper ballot. But I have learned something else: the public does not trust computers, or the people who programme them enough to rely on electronic methods of voting. At least that is true in the United States.

The U.S., unlike many countries, has very complicated ballots. In one county in California in 2006 there were 30 races on the ballot involving 98 different candidates plus another 30 referenda to be voted on. It required voting on six sides of optical scan sheets. Unfortunately, the U.S. experience with electronic voting has not been good. Ever since the Bush-Gore debacle of 2000, which resulted in the banning of punched cards, every other method of voting has led to problems. Most recently, in an election in Sarasota County, Florida, more than 18,000 voters failed to cast a vote for a critical legislative race, a virtually unprecedented undervote of 15%.

Even when there is no overt irregularity, commercial voting machines have shown themselves to be among the least reliable devices on this planet. It has been reported anecdotally that approximately 10% of electronic voting machines fail in some respect during the average of 13 hours they are in use on Election Day. In some cases the experience is much worse. Unfortunately, such a failure rate is actually permitted by applicable government standards, although such a consequence was never intended. The machines are allowed to exhibit a mean time between failure (MTBF) of 163 hours. An ordinary personal computer has an MTBF of about 30,000 hours, almost 200 times better.

The result of the U.S. experience is that Congress and the states are moving to outlaw electronic voting and replace it with either hand-counted or optically scanned paper ballots. That will be a great mistake, for it ignores the very reason voting machines were introduced in the first place – to eliminate rampant corruption of elections through manipulation of paper ballots. In a paper ballot system, there is only one copy of the voter’s choices. If anything happens to that copy, such as alteration, mutilation, loss, or augmentation (called ballot-box stuffing), it is impossible to reconstruct the voter’s original choices and the election is permanently compromised. Many countries exhibit an inglorious history when it comes to ballot manipulation. In contrast, modern electronic systems keep redundant encrypted ballot records on multiple physical media. It is essentially impossible to corrupt all of them in a consistent fashion, making it easy not only to detect any attempt to intrude, but allowing easy reconstruction of the election.

Instead of expending engineering effort to improve system reliability and hence public comfort, the U.S. is poised to move backward. The reason is largely unwarranted fear, compounded by computer scientists who know a lot about computer security but very little about security of paper records. I urge a serious, scientific comparative study of the common methods of voting with a view toward improving the best modern system rather than discarding them.

For further reading:

A Typical U.S. Optical Scan Paper Ballot

A Typical Electronic Touchscreen Voting Machine. A simulation of its use can be found at http://elections.co.lake.fl.us/votronic_voting_demo.asp
FEAR AND DISTRUST OF TECHNOLOGY, OR OF ITS USE?

By coincidence, two of our articles in this issue deal with human anxiety over technology. While Professor Shamos has learnt that the public does not trust computers or the people who programme them enough to rely on electronic voting, our graduate Jackson Kwan reminds us not to let the advent of technology dictate our personal agenda.

I believe we fear and/or distrust technology usually for three reasons: we either know too much, or we do not know enough, or we are just unwilling to change because it sometimes means giving up certain cherished ideals or values in one’s life and society. The three reasons feature prominently in the public debates over the adoption of a national ID card in Australia and the UK. After the recent terrorist attacks in London and Glasgow, and the detention of an Asian-born medical doctors recently migrated to Australia whose contact information was revealed on the SIM card in the mobile telephone of one of the terrorists, the verdict is still out whether technology is a powerful tool to combat terrorism or one that could easily be used unwittingly to incriminate an innocent person.

In Australia, the national card was proposed twenty years ago as a safeguard against fraud and abuse of national benefits, but was rejected by the majority of its people. Public opinion is still divided about a national card over its reliability, cost, and especially its declared purposes, which are generally along these lines: prevent illegal immigration, aid anti-terrorism measures, and reduce benefit fraud and abuse of public services. The objections are loss of privacy, leading to “function creep”, and worsening harassment of ethnic minorities. One of our Australian instructors, Professor Roger Clarke (ECOM6001: Internet and the WWW), has pointed out that a card cannot be used as a tool against terrorism because face recognition is still unreliable (The Age, 2 August 2005). Some argue that unless there is a real-time verification system at any location where a national ID card check is required, the service cannot work effectively. Other concede that while the emergence of web services will make a card more achievable and eventually more affordable, linking the card with various data sources will be fraught with difficulty because of human input error and the data to be linked might be poor and incorrect.

I have just returned from a working trip to Hong Kong where I had to change my old ID card for a new smart card registering my photograph and fingerprint prints. While, like all good and obedient Hong Kong citizens, I have never questioned the government’s purposes and uses of the card, which has been around since the fifties; I do have my occasional moments of doubts about how much information is stored in that card about me. Have my tax, health, trips, education and job records been linked to the basic information on the card such as my date of birth, sex, address, and marital status and family? Who will have access to such information, which may or may not be correct, and for what purposes?

As we learn about and deploy smart cards, RFID, GIS, data warehousing, data mining technologies and information engineering in gathering marketing and customer information for e-commerce, perhaps we should also bear in mind the human factor and the paramount importance of ethics and human rights.

Angela Castro
MEICOM Connect Editor