

The Lifelong Surfer

By William Powell

Sometimes I don't appreciate the Web as much as I should, but recently my enthusiasm has been renewed. I started my annual project of building up a bicycle from a pile of parts. This time, however, I ran into a bit of trouble. Though I could have walked the block to my local bike shop for help, I turned instead to the Web. Specifically, the impressive Website created by bicycle tool manufacturer Park Tool www.parktool.com. Companies could learn from the way Park supports

its products. An extensive repair and maintenance section provides thorough descriptions of all repair procedures and the proper use of each tool. Future sales are encouraged by the "Typical Tools and Supplies Needed" paragraph that begins each repair procedure, but visitors aren't asked to register or purchase tools before using the site. The information is just there for anyone who's curious about bike repair. In a time of increased pay-per-use, it's refreshing to see a company

building community and brand loyalty by offering information for free.

Maybe cycling isn't your hobby of choice, but there are a number of Websites out there that provide a wealth of how-to information. Here's a handful that I've found useful.

eHow.com <| www.ehow.com

Whether you want to learn how to set an upper-arm fracture or improve your credit rating, this site has something for anyone with a how-to question.

One of this Website's strongest features is the additional tips provided from users. EHow must cull suggestions, because I rarely find fault with them, even with advice on topics on which I consider myself well versed.

You don't have to break an arm to find eHow useful, but just in case, as with all topics, there are detailed directions to help you set it right.

HowThingsWork.com

<| howthingswork.com

This is another Website for the constantly curious. Do you want to know how your PC, a slot machine, or a venus fly-trap works? HowThingsWork.com offers

an in-depth explanation.

Visitors can choose from a list of Super Categories, jump to a top-10 list of questions and articles, or search for whatever topic has them stumped. Articles are thorough, often with more information than the casual reader requires. One of the more useful features that accompany the articles is the extensive list of links to supporting information on other Websites. I can't think of a better resource for the life-long learner.

Webopedia.com <| webopedia.com

If, like me, you find it nearly impossible to keep up with the various acronyms and initializations of the latest technologies, try Webopedia.com. This online glossary provides definitions for everything from ANSI to XML.

Occasionally definitions can be just as challenging as the original term, but you can get the gist, and key terms are linked to their own definitions.

If you're searching for a learning-specific term, try *Learning Circuits's* glossary

<| www.learningcircuits.org/glossary.html.

It provides hundreds of definitions for when the conversation turns to e-learning.

Froogle.com <| froogle.com

Froogle is a spin-off of Google that uses the search engine's "spidering" software to search for products. The site is still in beta, but it's worth checking out. Users type in a product name just as they would for a search in Google, and Froogle delivers a list of results, including a product image, description, and price.

But Froogle doesn't have a shopping cart feature. It's strictly for "research."

Consumer Internet Barometer

The latest findings of the Consumer Internet Barometer <| www.consumerinternet-barometer.us show an up-tick in U.S. Internet usage for the fourth quarter 2002. Nearly 61 percent of consumers surveyed reported going online at least once a month, a modest increase from 58.7 percent in 2001. In terms of usage, personal communication is still the biggest draw at 37.9 percent. Work-related tasks (17.8 percent) and research (17.3 percent) were next in line.

QuickTip

When an email conversation needs to become a face-to-face meeting, Microsoft Outlook users can use AutoCreate to turn their email thread into a meeting request.

This feature lets you turn any Outlook item, such as a contact or email message, into any other form of Outlook item. All you have to do is drag the item to the desired icon in Outlook's Shortcut pane. So, to turn an email into a meeting request, click on the most recent email message from the thread and drag it over the Calendar shortcut. An Appointment window will appear along with the email thread in the text box at the bottom. Next, select Invite Attendees from the action bar, choose your attendees, and click Send. Your meeting request has been made.

<| Source/PC Magazine

Web = Waste of Time?

Hailed as a modern miracle in productivity tools, could it be that the Internet is turning into a drain on employee performance and company funds? So reports a recent study from Websense www.websense.com. With 70 million U.S. employees accessing the Web at work each day and surveyed employees admitting that they spend 1.5 hours goofing off each week, Websense estimates that U.S. corporations are experiencing US\$85 billion each year in lost productivity.

“Employee Internet misuse is a critical business issue for corporations. While the Web has long been hailed as a productivity tool, this misuse in some cases offsets the productivity benefits of Internet access,” says Andy Meyer, vice president of marketing for Websense.

It should be noted, though, that Websense has something to gain from such results. The company’s employee Internet management software is designed to do just that—manage employee Internet use. Regardless of the report’s accuracy or intent, few should doubt that as the Web becomes more engaging, employees will find it harder to resist.

You’ve Got to Give a Little

If you’re going to spend 1.5 hours per work week visiting non-work-related Web-

sites, you might do some good as well as goof off. Organizations such as IMentor www.imentor.org let adult volunteers act as virtual and in-person mentors to young people in underserved areas. Most of the interaction takes place via email, though IMentor provides plenty of opportunities to meet in person. Mentors are typically asked to spend only one hour per week working on a project-based curriculum designed by IMentor. So even if you’re busy, there’s plenty of time to participate. Just be prepared for the commitment. Mentors are expected to work with their mentees for at least one year.

IMentor is one of hundreds of organizations that provide opportunities for online volunteers. The Virtual Volunteering Project www.service-leader.org/vv lists more than 100 agencies that use online volunteers.

Along with several e-mentoring opportunities, virtual volunteer opportunities exist through more traditional outlets such as the American Lung Association and the United Way, as well as volunteering with other professionals.

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The Web covers Internet technology trends, news, and tips.

Send comments, questions, and items of interest to theweb@astd.org.



Step Away From the Computer

No sooner had the Internet started to reach U.S. homes than a great debate began. The Internet’s critics decried that Internet users were making a terrible sacrifice, substituting online entertainment and communication for more meaningful and rewarding face-to-face interaction. Internet proponents countered that it enables us to connect, albeit virtually, with people across the globe, creating new communities that would otherwise be impossible. The debate is still on. However, research conducted at Stanford University and published at IT&Society.org www.itandsociety.org shows that “like a hydraulic system,” there’s an equilibrium to maintain: Time spent on the Internet means time spent away from traditional, face-to-face social activities.

Whether a virtual social life is equal to a real life is still open to debate. But there’s no question, according to the survey, that Internet usage at home has a “strong negative impact on time spent with friends and family.” For every hour spent on the Internet at home, the model suggests, people spend an average of almost 30 fewer minutes with their families.