

LIVING IN THE WIRELESS NEIGHBORHOOD

AUTHOR: DANIEL HENDERSON, founder and president of PhoneTel Patent Services Inc., is an inventor with over 30 issued and pending patents in communications. A prototype wireless-communication device he developed is in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Honored as a Special Friend of the University, he is on the Albert Dorman Honors College Advisory Board.

What does local place mean in the 21st century and what defines community? Is it the boundaries of your region? Your country? How has wireless communication reshaped the way we interrelate with one another?

These are vital questions for us to think about in 2003.

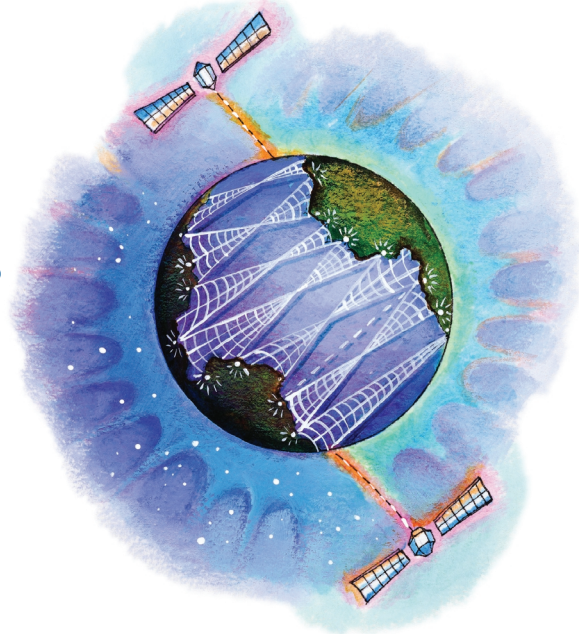
I am an inventor and I help other inventors protect their patent rights. I believe in the power of the patent. Innovation is a catalyst that betters society, creates new industries and fuels economic development.

I have witnessed first hand the impact of global communications. In 1993, after leaving a message on a telephone answering machine in Japan, I received a return call from Dr. Kazuo Hashimoto and became his assistant. Hashimoto is widely regarded as the Edison of Japan for inventing Caller ID and over 1000 other patented innovations. I kept a promise to Hashimoto and have successfully enforced his patents throughout the telecommunications and computer industries.

Today, cell phones, personal computers and the Internet are connecting us as friends, trading partners and global neighbors. We are being empowered with unrivaled access to each other – and to the world around us. In Sweden, four out of five college loan applications are already completed from cell phones. The instantaneous exchange of information worldwide enables small businesses to compete in markets once dominated by powerful corporations. Society is being reengineered by technological innovation.

Before long, our children will touch a keyboard to access every book ever written, every painting ever painted, every symphony ever performed. Banking and payment via cell phone will virtually eliminate paper checks and paper money. Playing games, browsing the Internet, video and picture messaging, getting weather forecasts, placing bids on eBay® – all will be done from our cell phones.

Communication devices are also becoming “location aware” through personalization technology developed by inventor Fred Herz that can automatically deliver information based on where we are and what we need at any moment. If you like Starbucks® coffee, your cell-phone will alert you with an electronic coupon and a map to the nearest store as you step off the plane in a city far from home.



Our cell phone is becoming the remote control for our lives. We are migrating from calling a location such as a home, office, or hotel to calling a person – no matter where they are in the world. And this is only the beginning. The cell phone and computer are converging into a single device that will collect, store and access information while we travel from place to place.

Yet the immense power of our communication tools is not without risk to personal safety and privacy. For example, the Amazon company, Alexa, provides a new class of software known as “spyware” that tracks your online movements and browsing/shopping habits, to be shared with other parties. The ethics we develop to guide the use of these tools and how we resolve the problems they create will determine their ultimate value to civilization.

The repercussions of one bad decision can be immediate in the online, wireless world. One click sends the abusive letter, the tragically unwise military command. Ironically, the antidote to many of these problems in the world of instant communication will be spending one-on-one time with friends and family, and personal service to others and society.

During World War II, Kazuo Hashimoto was a mechanic for Japanese planes used to attack the United States. After December 1941, it was unthinkable that our two countries would ever be friends. But, I submit, that history has an interesting way of working things out, especially if we commit ourselves to building a positive future.

With somber reverence, Japanese nationals and I have visited the USS Arizona Memorial in Hawaii, side by side. I have been immersed in Japanese culture while traveling on a crowded bullet train in Japan. I have waited in line for sushi at a restaurant in Washington, D.C.

Who would have ever imagined that an American marine would proudly be the assistant to a former Japanese soldier to ensure that the world respected his inventive genius?

Even now, as we face terrorism, war and SARS, history teaches hope for a better tomorrow. Wireless communication is expanding our access to information, and to each other, in ways unimaginable just a few years ago. Where we are from is fast becoming irrelevant as we learn that we are all headed in the same direction. ■