Upfront*interview*

John Patrick: the fine art of blogging

John Patrick is a founding member and chairman of the Global Internet Project and a founding member of the World Wide Web Consortium at MIT. He led IBM's charge into e-business. After 35 years with IBM, where he was chief Internet technology officer, Patrick is now a speaker and author.

How would you describe yourself?
I am not a consultant, that's not my thing. I like to write and speak and participate on boards so I would describe myself as an author, lecturer and hobbyist. I love technology. I like acquiring it. Look at this digital camera I have just bought. It's Japanese – called "Che-ez!" – you wear it around your neck, it's very small and has a USB connection. So I like to fool with technology.

The thing I'm into at the moment is "blogging", building and maintaining a web log. It is similar to discussion groups but the best description is that a web log is a diary. I have just written one about a spray paint I bought! People are now making a living from blogging and I think that blogging may well emerge as potentially the primary source of published material. That's radical but possible.

So, I enjoy communicating, sharing experiences and over the years I've learned to communicate fairly well, I think.

Some people have a passion for golf, I don't. I would just as soon be doing something with my computer. I don't see emails as work. It is communicating with people so I don't bother to measure how much time I spend answering emails.

The thing I don't enjoy is spam. It is now encroaching on our personal lives in a very offensive way. People are stealing our time and I'm very concerned about this.

I hope that the only answer isn't government regulation. I'm hoping for creative, technical ways to deal with this. The solution, I think, is authentication. Authentication means having a digital ID so if someone without an ID sends you an email the message will be automatically deleted. If the sender has an ID you still know who gave them the ID and then you might read the message. Authentication solves a lot of problems. Authentication is the empowerment that will enable e-commerce to go onto the next step and help eliminate spam.

So you don't like the anonymity offered by email?
The important thing is that if I can establish you are who you say you are I can establish the level of privacy I want. Anonymity is OK. I don't think most people want to be anonymous but think of battered wives, for example, who might want and need to be anonymous.

What about issues of privacy?
Authentication would give you confidentiality. Now most emails aren't encrypted so they can be read. If you had a private key only you

Patrick: offended by spam

can then read your emails. It is time for leaders of governments, financial organisations, educational institutions and other bodies to step forward and take a leadership role. In Spain digital IDs have been distributed to people so they can look at their taxes online.

Isn't part of the problem that the Internet is beyond the control of a single body or government?
The magic of the Internet is that no one individual or body is actually in charge of it. Instead, there are lots and lots of working groups and standards groups, without which there wouldn't be an Internet anyway.

There is no central plank on which the Internet relies and without which it would fall apart. There have been predictions of the Internet's collapse over the years but it is highly distributed. September 11 destroyed important portions of the Internet but it has carried on.

Yet 10 years ago the Internet was viewed with some scepticism even by

technology companies.
Most people, and companies like Microsoft and IBM as well as many others, viewed the Internet as interesting but little more.

The grassroots proved otherwise. The grassroots is made up of a lot of smart people throughout the world who have a passion for technology and solving problems. Problems will be solved by working groups made up of volunteers.

At the moment the Internet is not as reliable as the telephone system but which would you rather have?

How did IBM come to the Internet so early in its development?
When Lou Gerstner came along and saw the Internet he saw its potential. He is a great communicator and he saw its power. At that time, e-business hadn't been invented so he didn't know where the business opportunity lay but knew that it was a powerful communication mechanism.

Weren't you ever tempted to leave IBM?
I had a constant barrage from head-hunters to go to California and run this and that company. But the best opportunity lay at IBM because it has great people and great resources – you know, it has around 3,000 PhDs involved in research.

The Internet galvanised the company. There had been a time when the company had no strategy – then e-business became the strategy. Everyone suddenly knew that that was our business.

You were in the right place at the right time?
At a personal level, there was a certain amount of luck and serendipity in all this. I've been involved in a few fortunate things.

The thing with IBM and the Internet is that lots of people have great ideas but can't communicate them very well. Lou Gerstner sent out a booklet called *One Voice* in 1995 or 1996 to the home addresses of everyone in the company. It said that the Internet was our future. He encouraged people to try things, to use the Internet. Our worry was that people weren't using the Internet enough. We weren't bothered about people looking at pornographic sites – one employee who did was fired – our bigger concern was getting people oriented around the Internet.

How did you get older managers involved?
One of the things IBM does is reverse mentoring. A 25-year old is assigned to a senior vice-president. Now, of course, people over 65 are one of the fastest-growing sectors of Internet use. They have grandchildren who won't write or call but who will send email.

How can you maximise your e-business?
All the technology and money on the planet won't enable you to meet people's expectations if you don't have the right attitude, which includes the ability to think globally but act locally, think big but start simple, think outside-in instead of inside-out, be able to accept "just enough is good enough", engage in trial by fire, transform to a model of sense and respond instead of the traditional model of plan, build, deliver.

This attitude comes from the grassroots thinking that was part of the evolution of the Internet. It's hard to describe. Young people tend to have it but it's not really an age thing. The masses of people in the middle layers of large organisations often don't have it. The bureaucracies of large organisations have shielded them from the new

way of thinking and, in some cases, Darwinian instincts have caused them to put up their own shields.

What's the next big thing?
One thing that is emerging in the US is WiFi, wireless fidelity, which will become huge. It reminds me of how the Internet was 10 years ago.

The last mile is getting high-speed connections into the home. Now you don't need to involve the phone or cable company, you can do it through wireless. Community-based wireless access is emerging.

I can feel the grassroots nature of what's taking off. People are making antennae from a Pringles can and the putting it on the roof of their buildings. These things have a range of a few miles and mean that people can use the broadband technology used by their employers when they're at home.

I was in a sandwich shop in a small town in Connecticut and wondered if there were any wireless networks in the air. There were and I was soon connected at 1.3 million bits per second. I don't know where the signal was coming from but I was connected and didn't have to pay.

When CIOs hear this they shudder. They say it's insecure, unreliable – the same list as 10 years ago when they were talking about the Internet.

We are on the verge of a new era for the Internet that's as big and exciting as the first. It will have seven characteristics – fast, always on, everywhere, natural, intelligent, easy and trusted. The pace is accelerating with more competition, fewer barriers to entry and high expectations. At the moment we are only five per cent into the Internet's ability.

Interview by Stuart Crainer