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COMMENTARY: TECHNOLOGY

By Steve Hamm

So Many Pages, Such Feeble Search

Microsoft is just the latest tech outfit to tackle the info-overload problem. It's joining a host of others that have miles to go

For proof that Internet search technology is still in its infancy, go to the Web site for Microsoft's ([MSFT](#)) new [would-be Google killer](#). The company has invited people to try out a test version and suggest improvements. It could definitely use some. A search for Web pages related to the key words "Bill" and "Gates," for instance, starts off well with a couple of links to Gates' own Web pages on Microsoft's corporate site. But the results quickly devolve into a catch-all of random and even loony Gates-related material -- including a guide to hiring a William H. Gates III impersonator and a tongue-in-cheek spoof that tries to prove Gates is the devil.

That's a bummer. Microsoft has spent \$100 million on the new technology -- its attempt to catch up with Google's great leap forward in Web search. Clearly, a lot more has to be done, though -- and not just by Microsoft but Google and other search and analysis companies. There's still too much gravel among the nuggets of digital gold. The challenge for the computer industry is to make major strides in dealing with information overload -- both by improving search and coming up with more powerful tools for managing information.

GETTING PERSONAL. Unfortunately, Gates and his industry rivals are rowing against the tide. On top of more than 5 billion Web pages in existence, 50 million new or changed pages are added every day, according to IBM ([IBM](#)), and about 57 billion e-mails are sent per day, according to market researcher Radicati Group. Add it all up and you sometimes have too much of a good thing.

Microsoft says it takes an average of 11 minutes to complete a routine Web search -- way too long in this time-compressed world. With digital photos, e-mails, and music files fast filling up people's hard drives, better ways must be found to find and organize all this information. And corporations need more sophisticated tools for combing through the flood of information on the Net and in their own databases and picking out just the bits that will impact their businesses.

The burden is on the industry to turn the information tsunami into an unadulterated good. Until its engineers create much better ways of sorting through the sea of digital information that's flooding people's lives, consumers won't be able to get the most out of the Internet, and corporations won't receive full value for the nearly \$8 trillion they have spent on info tech over the past decade. "We're just scratching the surface of what needs to be done," says Howard D. Wactlar, vice-provost for research computing at Carnegie Mellon University. "There's just so much information and so much of it isn't useful."

HIDDEN ASSOCIATIONS. Luckily, some of the tech industry's best minds are focused on harnessing the data deluge. The next innovation coming from Google is search pegged to an individual's location and personal preferences. For example, if you want pizza to go, you'll see only restaurants in your area that deliver. Apple ([AAPL](#)) is set to release a new technology called Spotlight that provides one technique for searching for anything within your own computer -- be it a document, e-mail, phone number, photo, or music file.

And, for corporations, IBM's new WebFountain service combs through the Web to find associations that aren't readily apparent. For instance, bank officers can use the technology to help figure out if high-transaction customers may be laundering money.

Some of the advances will require major breakthroughs in computer science and user-interface design. Microsoft is working on a system called Notification Platform that people train to understand their interests and priorities -- and then turn loose to manage the flow of information and communications. One nifty feature: When people want to contact you, their computers negotiate with your computer to find the best time and method for interacting.

SPENDING TIP. The bad news is that while some pieces of the technology will arrive sooner, it could take as long as 5 to 10 years for this vision to become a commercial reality, according to Eric Horvitz, a senior researcher at Microsoft Research.

For now, information overload ranks as one of the top frustrations of computing. So here's an idea for Microsoft: Take a big slug of your \$56.4 billion in cash and spend it on coming up with new ways to put only the most valuable information at people's fingertips.

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