Confidence as world commodity

Chris Warner, Executive Editor

For all the new component demos I see each year, particularly those with applications for consumer electronics, I often wonder whether the latest whiz-bang feature that a particular component is intended to deliver for the end-product is really satisfying some sort of demand. In other words, does the end-user have an appetite for that revolutionary new feature? I was thinking along those lines when I recently read that for the last couple of years, folks have been going online to download Super Bowl commercials to watch the repeats on cell phones. As someone who sees television commercials as an opportunity to leave the room for any reason, I have to wonder if this is truly the best we can get out of the latest cellular technology.

A new study from the Institute for Innovation and Information Productivity (IIIP) is designed to measure exactly what I've been grappling with — innovation confidence. According to IIIP Research Committee Chair and Microsoft Director of Information Work Vision, Dan Rasmus, "As economic success shifts from industrial production to the utilization of knowledge through innovation, we need new vehicles to understand the willingness of markets to accept innovation." Current techniques of measuring performance still rely on industrial-age criteria, and they don't adequately consider new technology for their ultimate purpose of providing insight to governments and other entities looking to allocate investments, identify opportunities and threats, or to make other improvements.

The Innovation Confidence Index, which can be found at the IIIP Web site (www.iii-p.org [1]), was conducted via polling 25,000 people in 12 nations. Criteria such as education level, gender and age were examined. Its results show the United Arab Emirates as the most confident, with The Netherlands as the least confident toward technology and innovation, and the United States squarely in the middle.

The results raise some interesting and valuable issues. For instance, India, Brazil and Ireland — countries with growing economies and young populations — come in second through fourth, respectively, in innovation confidence, while the continental European countries rank lowest. The IIIP notes that despite their widespread use of mobile telecommunications, "Only one-third of Finns expect in the next six months to try products or services that use new technology." Does this mean that a population so heavily invested in the knowledge economy is underwhelmed by quality-of-life results of new technology, seeing it as solving problems that did not exist, or is it creating new problems along the way?

The author, Jonathan Levie of the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, does not offer any conclusions, but the study does make sense. Companies need customers to actually buy their products, and areas where innovation confidence is high represent opportunities for sales which fuel further innovation and cutting-edge products. Governments could also examine innovation confidence to determine

where to identify areas that need improvement, such as the local education systems where partnerships between the public and private sectors may be beneficial. This is an idea whose time has come because, after all, to come out a winner in a knowledge economy, it's best to be forearmed AND forewarned.

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