Lib science

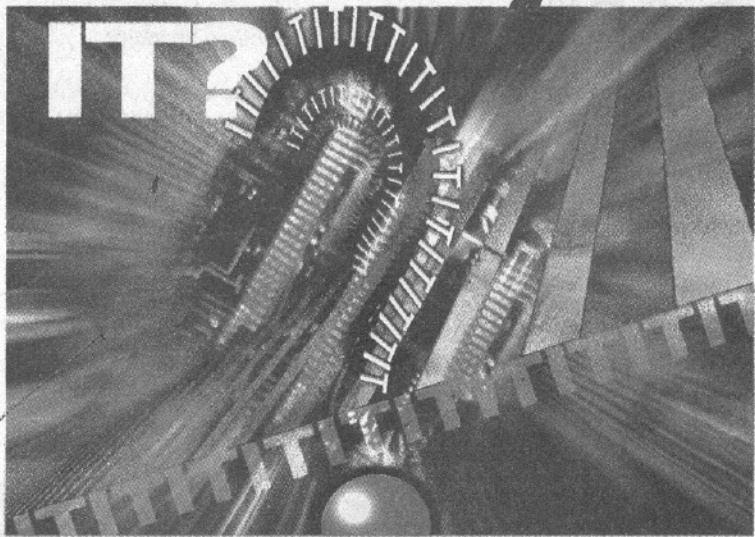*Nation 11-11-...*

Do we really need IT?

AMINA KAMAL KHAN maintains that IT proliferation creates a 'productivity paradox' and is an innovation we can easily do without

The whole world seems to think that the IT 'revolution' is the greatest thing to come after the French Revolution. Governments are wildly following the IT craze that is taking the world by storm. In India alone, the Internet craze has made the service available in remote areas. People are storming to IT institutions and, after the MBA craze, IT is said to be the next 'in' thing in education in Pakistan, regardless of whether or not IT professionals will have the jobs they need.

How do we justify our preoccupation with a virtual world that we cannot physically grapple with and that we can only capture in a 'virtual' way through the millions of electric impulses it is made up of? After all, these electric impulses are the only existence and the only boundary in which IT can properly exist. Information Technology, or IT as it is called nowadays, will soon take over the world. But before it completely destroys our perspective, lets take a look at the 'revolution' which is not as positive as most people would like.

If you think IT is going to change the world for the better, think again. Yes, it may change the world, but will the change be for the better? Before you bound out of your seat with an enraged "of course!" take a look at this bit of factoid: The US, the forerunner of the IT revolution, has not to date announced any increase in productivity or output. In other words, if we ignore other economic development factors and concentrate on IT alone, USA has not announced any good to have come of it all. More people are jobless, companies are more dependent on computers though, of course, there has been that slight increase in processing speed that companies go for. This is what experts now refer to as the 'Productivity Paradox'.

Our question is: Does the increase

ignored. Poor people are as poor as ever, and the rich are as rich as ever. People are waiting for the miracle to occur: after all, almost all schools and colleges have computers. Weren't the computers supposed to change every thing? Weren't they supposed to improve the quality of life? The point is, that when a developing country like Pakistan concentrates so much on one aspect of development, it cannot afford to spend on other areas. Hence the problems. Plus, your infrastructure is the same as it was in the year 2000. So if there is a computer breakdown in, lets say the banking network, what happens? No comments. Then again, the IT professionals that are being churned out at this time do not have jobs because while the government was concentrating on education, it neglected to create a market for those educated.

Moreover, many institutions are simply computerising their system, without really considering if their financial input will lead them to a reward or not. They go after the 'modern', 'computerised' and 'up-to-date' image that seems to be a popular trend these days. So what if computers act like office accessories, after all, they are there!

We also need to ask ourselves another important question: What exactly do we want to take from the IT storm? Are we going to try and improve the quality of life in the country or are we just trying to compete with India? Then again, what benefits will computerisation bring us? You should remember the Y2K bug craze that hit the world and people in the US went to the hills, stockaded piles of food (and ammunition) and barricaded themselves in their houses to await 'the-end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it'. And you should also remember that the only countries that did not face a crisis were the developing countries that do not have such extensive computerisation.

We should also turn our faces in a new direction. How about Singapore? This country is an exporter of computer supplies and

computers be put. This lack of direction means that: a) the money (presumably from the budget) is lost due to lack of direction, and b) since the funds are diverted towards the immediate development of computer facilities, we lose out on other vital areas of development.

The money, even if it were to be paid back eventually, would have been better spent in creating potential job situations for those who would lose their jobs due to computerisation. The present lack of jobs is creating an unsavoury situation already, which would be compounded when people are rendered jobless because their job has been taken over by a machine.

Hanging the threat of computerisation on your employees head like the sword of Damocles could have adverse affects on productivity as well. Employers need to ask themselves whether computerisation will increase productivity or not, before jumping into the bandwagon, which is what every Tom, Dick and Harry is doing. It is all right to have your payroll department computerised, but do you really want your business to hang on machines? All they do is remove the necessity for a human worker and take a human's place. They do not do anything more than that. Programmed by a human hand and possessing the proxy of a human brain, we cannot hope for a more productive object that ourselves unless the machines start manufacturing better models of themselves.

If you are thinking about the money you will save by dismissing an employee, you should also consider the initial layout you will have to finance for mechanisation and the maintenance costs. Thank God humans can run on their own for some time without expensive maintenance!

Then again, mellow your mood and think: When you go to the bank, would you really like a mechanical voice to greet you (that is where the IT craze is headed: less human, more machine)? Would you trust your

companies go for. This is what experts now refer to as the 'Productivity Paradox'.

Our question is: Does the increase in speed make up for all the loss of employment and the following recession? For those who idolise the West, here is another bomb. USA has been in recession for a long time and IT has not been able to pull the country out of the slump. Of course you see American and European software companies showing big profits, what else could possible follow from downsizing? In other words, reconsider your stance on the subject, because under that façade of development, many people are starting to have second thoughts about the 'revolution'.

There are more dangers of Information Technology, especially from Pakistan's perspective, that are often ignored or bypassed in the popular 'yea'. Consider the scenario: it is 2010 and Pakistan is sufficiently dependent on machines to compete with India. However, since the government has spent so much on developing the IT revolution in the country, other areas of development have been largely

extensive computerisation.

We should also turn our faces in a new direction. How about Singapore? This country is an exporter of computer supplies and yet its population is not particularly enamoured of computers. Consequently, Singapore does not have a great domestic market for computers. Whatever the reason for this interesting paradox, we should remember that when we produce Bata sandals, our domestic market responds even in the presence of other sandal manufacturers. It is virtually unthinkable that something good is available in the market, that is exported to other countries, and the domestic consumers are not interested. Singapore should be a food for thought.

A rather alarming trend that is following the government's loan to colleges to set up computer labs, is the general lack of direction these programs are facing. It is in the grapevine that a certain college, that has taken the grant from the government, is now trying to work out how to utilise it. The administration is not sure how the lab will be set up, what subjects will be offered and to what use will the

men again, mellow your mood and think: When you go to the bank, would you really like a mechanical voice to greet you (that is where the IT craze is headed: less human, more machine)? Would you trust your bank if all the transactions were to depend on computers? Would you trust your telephone company if the infrastructure was computerised? Would you bless a machine for making your company process data faster if it means that machine will make you jobless? If you think machines eradicate errors, remeber that the hand behind the machine is that of a human being. In other words, keep reminding yourself that the Y2K bug was actually the result of a human error and a lack of foresight. As we become more and more 'advanced' our problems tend to snowball, because every thing is dependent on everything else!

Increasing dependence on machines is like increasing dependence on an artificial brain that can only use logic and is inhuman, insofar as emotions are concerned. Would you like such a machine as your boss?

Think well before you take the plunge.