



# Plant operator of the near future

Information technology is transforming the chemical industry and its employees

Our December editorial, "Seize the future or step aside," elicited quite a reaction from one of our subscribers. The reader reacted most strongly to a statement by SAP's Chris Larsen, who said: "Workers will have more hand-held, palm-top wearable devices. A plant maintenance worker, for example, could be walking along with a device clipped to his or her belt. The worker, seeing that a machine has an extra vibration or that oil is dripping, will whip out the computer and send off a maintenance work order without using a piece of paper."

Our reader objected. "The people making these statements," the reader said, "forget that you can't make a technically competent individual out of a hamburger cook in much less than eight to 10 years. You must remember that 'hand-held, palm-top' devices can't think. Someone has to decide where to kick the pump and how hard."

How true. But information technology can help skilled employees produce even better results. Look how IT's breathing new life into what was recently the tired idea of life-cycle costing, as noted in CP's November editorial on "New life for life-cycle costing." For more on the subject, and some advice on how to approach it, see Jim Porter's article on "Business Value and the Information Technology Equation" (pg 74).



Information technology is figuratively (and literally) changing the face of the chemical industry. For more details, see pg 74. (Photo by Norman Maukopf, Wired magazine, courtesy of DuPont)

Here, Porter, DuPont's vice president of engineering and operations challenges the facility supply chain to commit to a new course, namely electronic life-cycle data for owner facilities.

His vision for life cycle data, presented at the PlantSuccess '99 Conference in Philadelphia, is that the technical knowledge that defines a facility is created, updated and maintained in an electronic database with that engineering and plant operation data managed over the facility's entire life cycle.

So what does that mean to the plant operator of the future? While the picture below is taken from the aerospace industry, consider the following perspectives from our December editorial on the "future of work" by the year 2003:

- Common communications will be on the Web;
- E-commerce will be the way of doing business;
- A lot of today's specialized on-site expertise will no longer be needed, because plants will have real-time access to higher-level expertise all over the world;
- Fewer people will work in the plants, and work will be more challenging for those who remain;
- People will have access to more information and data—not just the people in offices, but more and more people working throughout the plant.

Taken together, those changes constitute a revolution—not just evolution—in the workings of the chemical industry and the world at large.

See this month's cover story for additional perspectives on the dawning of the e-economy.



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