Perceptions of Computers: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

Donald Joyce
Carolyn Nodder
Mark Northover
Johannes Sprigode
UNITEC Institute of Technology
djoyce@unitec.ac.nz

ABSTRACT

Students on UNITEC's Master of Computing programme conducted a survey to investigate public perceptions of computers. This poster presents the survey results and highlights some interesting patterns in the responses (including age and gender differences).

1. Introduction

One of the four compulsory courses in UNITEC's Master of Computing programme, which began in February 2000, has the stated aim "to enable students to analyse the impact of information technology on society from social and ethical perspectives". Topics covered include historical develoment of IT, culture and gender issues, strengths and weaknesses of new and emerging technologies, ethical behaviour and criteria for professionalism. 16 students took the course: five computing practitioners, five tertiary teachers, two secondary teachers, two technical support staff, a librarian and a sales representative.

2. The Survey

As part of the information gathering for the course, the students conducted a survey of 100 people. The survey established each respondent's age, gender, current weekly computer useage, first computer use (what, where and when), and first significant impact of computers on them. Respondents were then asked to identify:

♦ two ways in which computers have made their lives better

♦ two ways in which computers have made their lives worse

♦ two ways in which computers could make the world better in future

♦ two ways in which computers could make the world worse in future

Most of the impacts identified in the last four questions could be placed in one of 12 categories: business, communication, dependency/vulnerability, education, health/medicine, information, keeping up, leisure, social, security/privacy, time, work.

3. Conclusion

Some interesting patterns were observed in the responses. For example:

♦ most respondents thought "internet" when computers were mentioned

♦ business impacts were mentioned by 16 respondents aged 30 or more, but only 2 aged 29 or less

♦ communication (133) and information (85) were the categories with the most responses, and 90% of these came under "better" rather than "worse"

♦ 20 respondents (10 male and 10 female) identified ways in which computers had made **their** health worse, but none suggested that computer-related health problems could make **the world** worse in future, and five respondents (all males over 30) identified ways in which computers could improve health in the world.