

# Fortune Magazine Interviews Dr. Canton



## **Fortune** **Leading-Edge Strategies for Collaboration**

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Fortune Magazine Interviews Dr. James Canton  
President, Institute for Global Futures

This is a very good time to be thinking about how to generate value from networks of interaction, according to Dr. James Canton, president of the Institute for Global Futures, a San Francisco think tank that advises corporations around the world about leading-edge technologies. It is a good time, he says, because current definitions of collaboration will expand exponentially as soon as fast bandwidth becomes more available. “

Fast bandwidth, which I am forecasting will increase by 300 percent this year in the U.S., will provide the pipe for new and more powerful forms of collaboration,” Canton says. One outcome, he adds, will be the wide-spread use of real-time video e-meetings featuring multiple screen windows. “One window will certainly be for real-time face contact, because we, as humans . want some kind of visual, tactile identification. A second window will be for looking at data. A third window Might be for viewing video demonstrations of various kinds.

That’s stage 1, as Canton sees it: multiple windows in a rich, real-time interactive multimedia environment: Stage 2, he says is virtual “telepresence,” in which users can navigate through virtual environments for training, education, and communications. Stage 3 is full sensory telepresence, where one can actually “feel” objects and navigate through environments equipped with sensory connections. In a fast bandwidth environment, says Canton, Such things are

feasible, and these three stages . will materialize over the next five years as new, highly secured versions of the Internet are developed for business-to-business commerce.

What Canton envisions is something much more transformative than meetings between coworkers or even across partnered companies. “This is much bigger than saying, ‘Now we’re all going to be able to talk over the Internet and do more work and produce better,’” he says. “Companies will have the ability to throw out a net and find customers for products and services that haven’t been created. They will be able to identify a market, obtain commitments from customers, and locate the resources needed to produce the product or service, all through e-collaboration.”

Canton is not naive; he knows that many of the pieces necessary to fulfill this vision are still missing. Ultimately, however, it isn’t the global communications platform that he sees as the biggest hurdle. Traditional telcos are working feverishly to figure out how to provide that infrastructure and he is confident that they will have the pipes in place before long.

What concerns Canton more is the fact that, while the pieces are coming together to permit real-time multimedia interaction, meeting participants are still very far from being able to retrieve information on demand from internal databases.

In order to for employees to collaborate successfully, or for companies to communicate effectively with suppliers and business partners, the information needed to make plans, answer questions, and reach decisions – inventory and shipment data, supplier performance statistics, account histories, market intelligence, etc. – must be immediately accessible.

How well companies do at connecting all the pieces, as they become available will, in Canton’s words, “define the winners and losers in the 21st-century marketplace.” And, he adds, companies that hope to come up on the winning side ought to be acting now to ensure that outcome. Some measures Canton recommends are:

- Thinking about how customers' needs are likely to change in a real-time connected economy and how to provide more value to those customers in this new environment.
- Investing in systems and software that will transform how employees communicate to get their jobs done.
- Allowing the organization to experiment with new methods of collaboration and creation of “knowledge webs.”