



# The Opportunities: Information Communications Technology

By Atiba Phillips

**M**any traditional organisations have some amount of Information Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure already built in. Technology is interwoven in the fabric of organisations now, from business to academia, to Government, in ways that simply weren't possible ten years ago. Smartphones, laptops, intranets, e-mail, office productivity software, etc. are common business tools even in business environments that do not consider themselves as ICT savvy.

With the slowdown in the world economy, however, governments and companies alike are feeling the economic pinch. Organisations can no longer buy the latest technology gizmo simply because it's out there; there is now a much greater imperative that the technology must drive business results. In conversations with Government Ministers, Permanent Secretaries, CEOs and Business Executives, I have observed the expressed need for answers with respect to the application of ICT to the accomplishment of their strategic goals, particularly in these times of fiscal prudence. The IT organisations within these businesses have provided a part of the solution, yet there remains a gap, particularly at the strategic-level which connects the ICT investment with the goal of maximising return on business objectives. It is here that the first range of opportunities lies for new entrants into the ICT Sector.

**Strategic Technology & Business Consulting:** What is needed here is not so much an IT vendor, but an ICT consultant who understands the technology fundamentally, but also has a vision of how the technology can be applied strategically to advance business objectives. Such an ICT company can work innovatively with a

business, government agency, or academic institution, to identify the three or four key activities which, when re-visited and improved through the clinical integration of ICT, will deliver much more than proportionate value.

It is in this strategic use of ICT – gleaning new customer insights as well as using on-line channels to deliver key messages, optimising critical operational processes and helping firms lower their communications costs, all while making employees more productive and training board members to better plan for the opportunities ahead – that new upstart entrants in to the ICT game have the opportunity to make their mark.

InfoComm Technologies ([www.ict.co.tt](http://www.ict.co.tt)) is doing exactly that. A true start-up, it is more a knowledge company than a prototypical technology firm. Incorporated earlier this year, the small firm is staffed with mainly ICT consultants who possess a wealth of knowledge in the cross-sections of business, academia and Government. They are able to partner with customers to take an end-to-end look at the business and then deliver technology solutions (either themselves or through business partnerships) that make the biggest cost effective impact.

**Graphic Design & New Media:** As the ubiquity of the internet grows, and home users, businesses and Government offices become 'wired' with fast connections to the internet, a growing number of people will spend an increasing amount of their time on-line. As more eyes begin to be glued to the computer screen rather than the television screen, even during the traditional 7pm to 10pm evening news hours, local advertisers are beginning to take the medium more

seriously. Herein lies the bed of opportunity for the "creatives" (companies with expertise in areas such as graphics, new media production, on-line advertising, 2D and 3D animation, website design, video production webcasting and the like) to enter the ICT space. New creative companies will all find a space as marketing budgets turn their attention to the web.

One young local company that has been doing well in this space, for maybe two to three years now, is Significance Ltd., which offers a full range of on- and off-line graphics and has also been one of the pioneers (though still a small player) in the indoor and outdoor digital signage space.

**Education:** We find another trend, the explosion of interactive tutorials, webinars and e-learning in the academic sector, which will also favour firms trying to get into the new media ICT space. This boom is being driven in part by the significant growth of the education/training sector, which in Trinidad and Tobago is being heavily underwritten by Government. Lecturers and administrators at the University of the West Indies for example, frequently raise the issue of the inadequacy of physical space to accommodate the small-group tutorial sessions that have traditionally been a staple of their academic pedagogy, due to the growing enrollment population. Technology-mediated methods of learning are one way in which institutions are learning to cope with the sudden upsurge in student intake over the past few years.

**ICT for Good:** Another even more cutting-edge opportunity lies in the need to facilitate the upgrading of skills, especially of 'underserved' populations (those not well provided for by the formal social and



educational structures ) among us to deal with a rapidly changing economic and social environment that is increasingly influenced and driven by technology.

Young people today are heavily influenced by media, from cartoons to animations, movies to videos. These forms of technology-based art are highly attractive and are having a dramatic influence on the generation, who, while they are consumers of content, tend not to be producers of it. Many times it is this lack of capacity to express themselves that contributes to youth violence. We can help enhance their capacity for expression by sharing the technology-based tools and skill-sets that the young generation needs to create content. Using media that are compelling to them within the context of a positive facilitating environment will yield great societal return on investment.

There is a dire need for start-ups to enter into or to create such a market-space and to provide for the sharing of these tools and skills with young people, particularly those in the most need. Such ventures will probably not be non-profit at the outset and will have to rely on funding from Government, the private sector, or both, to remain financially viable. The social return on investment from such entrepreneurial activity though, will be phenomenal and well worth funding priority. One startup initiative that is doing work in this space, is called the Community HUB. Here, a group of stakeholders comes together to assist communities primarily through the use of cutting-edge ICT. You can contact the author for more information on this group.

### Unified Communications & VOIP:

According to the International Engineering Consortium, “unified communications” is “an industry term used to describe all forms of call and multimedia/cross-media message-management functions controlled by an individual user for both business and social purposes”. Wow, that’s a mouthful! Suffice to say that a revolution is happening in the traditional world of voice. In this new paradigm, voice will not require a separate telephone network but will take place over existing computer networks (thus driving cost efficiencies). With the global accent on “Green” the systems that will win will be able

to be software installed and upgraded with a minimum additional hardware required. What that means is that, as the technology evolves, simply downloading the latest version will upgrade your phone system. This clearly brings a level of flexibility and user-control not previously seen in the industry.

These changes represent a significant shift from the way things used to be and in many cases (unfortunately) still are. As Mervyn Marshall of CONNECT Ltd., a successful local entrepreneur in the Voice Over IP (VOIP) space, explains: “The evolution of ICT is outpacing the ability of traditional ICT organisations to adequately satisfy dynamic customer expectations. These organisations are labouring to make the transformations necessary and as such new entrants have an opportunity to fill the void by delivering within that gap. In this highly competitive global village customers who employ a dynamic business model cannot wait on suppliers to transform. They will simply get suppliers who can deliver to expectation!”

Given this country’s traffic situation, this development means that professionals can now be more productive either from home or on the road, as calls to a user’s desk phone can be instantly routed to a Blackberry for complete call control. Industry leaders in this space will launch applications in the second quarter of this year which will allow

“rich presence”, messaging and ultimately collaboration and conferencing – all from your mobile.

Though new local entrants into the ICT/VOIP market are not likely to be the creators of such technology, the opportunity is there for companies who understand this space to educate the business public about the benefits, not only of moving to VOIP, but to the latest technologies, and implementing them in ways that improve productivity and performance. Even in the context of a slow-down in our economy there is a plethora of opportunities within the ICT sector for those who know where to look. The ICT sector offers fertile ground on which small and medium enterprises can base their growth.

Firms must partner with and provide strategic insight to their clientele, innovatively using existing infrastructures alongside marginal ICT investments to deliver big improvements, whether in customer service, delivering targeted advertising or maximising internal operational efficiency. These types of firm will be in demand as all organisations seek to become more efficient and better connect with both their customers and employees. It is the firms that have been paying close attention to the sea of changes in the industry over the last few years, and who have formed partnerships to bring these skills and technologies to market (applying them on a customer to customer basis) who will win in this go-around.

### WELCOME TO WWW.CONTACT-TT.COM

In an effort to continuously improve our services to you and due to the overwhelming response we have received for our quarterly business magazine, **CONTACT**, we recently launched a website that caters to the needs of both our readers and advertisers. As the premier voice of business in Trinidad and Tobago, **CONTACT** provides a forum to inform about current business issues nationally, regionally and internationally. The magazine has a strong specialised thematic content, written and researched by respected business leaders and writers. Because of the focus of **CONTACT**, the magazine has a wide distribution and reaches key executives and leaders in the business community.

The website has many features to offer, including HTML and PDF compatibilities, archived issues of the magazine, advertising rates, along with translation assistance. You can even view the Chamber’s newspaper columns, which are published weekly in the Business Guardian and Newsday and monthly in the Business Express. We encourage you, to participate in **CONTACT** by logging on to the new website at [www.contact-tt.com](http://www.contact-tt.com), and to send us editorial content, letters to the Editor and even place an advertisement. We believe that involvement in **CONTACT** is a great opportunity for you to reach your company’s vital target markets.