

# Calls that waste your time

## Time-shifting technology slithers into mainstream in 2 new personal digital assistants / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

**C**OMPUTERS ARE supposed to save time and increase productivity, and mostly they do, which is why we put up with so many of their idiosyncrasies. But there is a disturbing trend among firms that are building computerized telephone systems. Instead of time saving, these systems are adopting the reprehensible practice of "time shifting" - wasting my time to save somebody else's time or money.

I had my first unpleasant experience with time shifting two summers ago, when Nylrex (now Bell Atlantic) introduced a new computerized directory assistance system. Now these systems are everywhere. Just dial 411 and the recorded voice of James Earl Jones pours out of your handset, booming, "Welcome to Bell Atlantic." Then another recorded voice asks, "What city?" And then, "What listing?" You speak your piece, and then the recorded voice says, "One moment please."

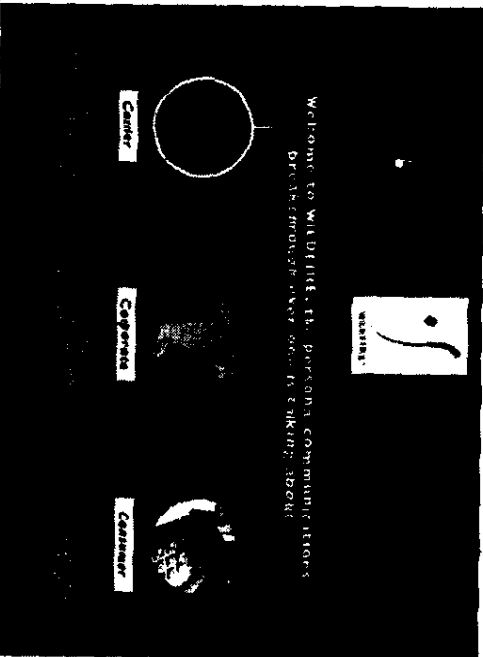
What many people using this service don't realize is that the real, flesh-and-blood operator doesn't actually hear your interrogation until after you finish speaking. Bell Atlantic's computer then finds a free operator and

plays back your recorded message. At this point you're likely to hear the clicking of a computer keyboard while the operator tries to find your number, says thank you, and then transfers you to another computer, which offers to connect you to the number for an additional fee - all before finally giving you the information that you asked for and paid for in the first place.

What I find most infuriating about the Bell Atlantic directory service is that it actually takes longer - sometimes twice as long - to get a phone number from directory assistance with the new system than with the old system. Now this invidious time-shifting technology is

going mainstream, with two companies offering personal digital assistants: Portico, by General Magic, and Wildfire, by Wildfire Communications. Both of these systems combine advanced

**Web page of Wildfire Communications.** **Which makes a telephone-based personal digital assistant.**



speech recognition with voice mail, teleconferencing, and an address book. I've had all-too-personal experiences with both systems lately. While they may be great for the person paying the bills, they make things considerably more difficult for the person making the call.

Last week I placed a call to my friend Lee Sherman in California. But instead of getting Lee, I heard a burst of music. Then a voice: "Good evening, welcome to Portico. You've reached the number for Lee Sherman. Please tell me your full name so I can say who is calling."

The Portico service employs a female's voice. It/she is smart, practical, and just slightly sexy. She catches me a bit off-guard. "Simson Garfinkel," I finally blurt out. "Hi there," continues the voice of General Magic's Portico. "Would you like me to try to find

him for you, or should I take a message?"

"Find him," I say.

"I'll try the number he left for me. This may take a minute." (More music plays.)

At this point, Portico actually does what I wanted to do in the first place: It calls Lee Sherman. At least it tries. But Portico doesn't have any more luck than I had. A minute later, Portico comes back on the line.

"Hi, sorry to keep you waiting. He's not available at the number he left. If you would like to leave a message, say yes or press 1. Otherwise, say no and press 2."

At this point, Portico works like a rather typical voice-mail system, taking my message and letting me correct it. The only difference is I've keyed in my number so that Lee can call me back automatically when he gets his messages.

Although it works like a big voice-mail system, Portico is priced by the minute, just like a cellular phone. When you use Portico you pay each time somebody

redeeming feature is that there are no long-distance charges, neither for the calls you place with the system nor for people calling you. Each Portico user gets their own personalized toll-free number. (You can learn more about Portico at [www.generalmagic.com](http://www.generalmagic.com).)

Portico also has some impressive Internet integration features. You can retrieve your voice mail over the Internet without charge. Portico will also keep track of your address book and calendar, or synchronize its address book and calendar with the applications on your desktop computer.

I suppose that Portico is great for Lee, but it left me with a bad taste in my mouth. Sure, I can now call him for free. But it takes me longer to reach him using Portico than by simply picking up the phone and dialing his home phone number.

Portico is remarkably similar to Wildfire, another telephone-based personal digital assistant that was developed by Lexington-based Wildfire Communications. Actually, the systems are extremely similar, down to the

smart-and-slightly-sexy rewording of a woman's voice that is the system's personality. One thing that's different about Wildfire, though, is the distribution model. Instead of selling direct, Wildfire goes through local service providers. In Boston, two companies selling the product are Milcom Corp. and Linx Communications. You can find more information at the Wildfire Website, [www.wildfire.com](http://www.wildfire.com).

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