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Leonardo's Laptop - Human Needs And The New Computing Technology

THE BOOK

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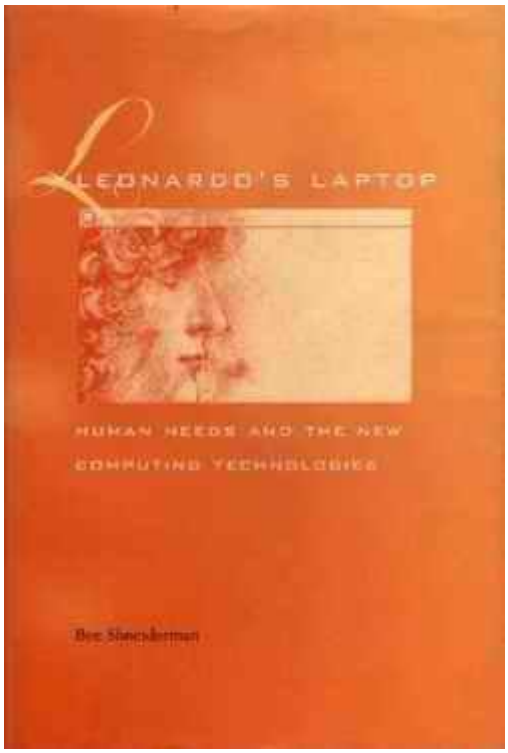
> *...HEARTILY RECOMMENDED TO ALL ...This is a book which I can heartily recommend to all - be he a student, a researcher or just a housewife...*

Editor's recommendation — this book carries the editor's "must buy" recommendation.

Leonardo's Laptop - Human Needs And The New Computing Technology *by* Ben Shneiderman. Hard Cover, 6" x 9".
The MIT Press, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142: xiv + 269 Pages: Publication Date: 2002: ISBN 0-262-19476-7: Price - $24.95

Official site of this book: http://mitpress.mit.edu/leonardoslaptop. (You can download three chapters of this book from this site completely free of cost, in addition to being able to read a number of reviews of this book and interviews with Ben, the author.)



"The old computing was about what computers could do; the new computing is about what users can do."

-An oft repeated refrain from this book

Modern day technology has influenced the human life tremendously. Computer, the child of technology, has emerged as an extremely powerful tool for performing myriads of tasks. Truly speaking, computers have affected every facet of human life. Human being's desire to explore nature and understand natural phenomena led to the sophistication of technology. In a broader sense technology is nothing but a tool to explore, understand and modify things as desired. Undoubtedly technology has made all these explorations easy. Computer technology has revolutionized the modern day life. This technology is still in its infancy and we can imagine quite easily how far it can go with such pace.

The present book "*Leonardo's Laptop*" has been presented by a well-informed professor of computer science at MIT. This is the state-of -the-art work presenting some examples of the possibilities that computer can offer. This book consists of 11 chapters and few pages of notes, references and index. Every chapter has been painstakingly written and is exceptionally impressive in the ideas it conveys.

The book revolves around the idea of "universal usability." I would regard it to be an idea because the author has presented it. This thought of technology development seems to be quite relevant in the present day scenario. This book clearly discusses various ramifications of technology development.

The author's selection of a 15th century scientist cum artist named Leonardo da Vinci is well and truly justified since he was the first technologist and a true scientist who combined art with science beautifully. In fact, I reckon him as a person much more than a scientist. He has rightly been named as "*the first scientist*" by Michael White. In one of his interviews Schneiderman explains why he chose this rather unusual name for his book. According to him, today users need computer systems

and interfaces that are graceful, elegant, comfortable, satisfying, comprehensible, predictable and controllable. These are just not extant today. Instead we have computers where viruses intrude on our experience, spam clutters our e-mail inboxes, our attachments won't open and the error messages are too frequent, too frustrating and confusing. Most of the time we don't have an iota of inkling as to the dialog boxes mean, and too often we are struggling because we can't understand the software interface.

Ben Shneiderman



Ben Shneiderman, the author of this book is a Professor in the Department of Computer Science, founding director of the Human-Computer Interaction Laboratory, and a member of the Institutes for Advanced Computer Studies and for Systems Research, all at the University of Maryland, College Park. He was elected as a Fellow of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) in 1997 and of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2001. The ACM's Special Interest Group in Computer Human Interaction bestowed a Lifetime Achievement Award on Shneiderman in 2001. For more see: www.cs.umd.edu/~ben.

Source: http://mitpress.mit.edu/main/feature/leonardoslaptop/author.html

How had Leonardo da Vinci used computers, were he alive today? Certainly with a lot more art and aesthetics. And that is why he has been chosen as an appropriate inspirational muse for the new computing. He combined art and science and aesthetics and engineering. That kind of unity is needed once again today!

The first chapter takes some pages of history and mingles it with the modern day thoughts about the genius. He was far ahead of his time - so much so that most of his work is still "valid." The book covers almost every point in which technology can help us improve our life. The ways with which the technology can itself be improved is also described in a very candid manner.

Every good has some amount of bad associated with it as well, and technology is no exception. The author has paid due respects to both these aspects of technology development. He has shown his big heart at the end of every chapter by discussing these things under the heading " The Skeptic's Corner." Here he zooms in and takes a closer look into the eyes of the user. This can be clearly understood by reading this piece from the book.

" Skeptics caution that accommodating lower end technology and lower ability users, or users with fewer skills will result in a lowest-common-denominator system that will be less useful to most users. This scenario, called "dumbing down" is a reasonable fear, but my experience supports a brighter outcome"...

Chapter 3, page 48

Debating about the negative aspects is in my view is very important to consider. However, a generalization that nothing in the world is risk-free automatically reduces the panic among the users. An interesting statistics show that road accident deaths are more compared to airplanes deaths! The only thing technology developers can do with constant efforts is to minimize the possibility of any danger.

> *...This book can be an exciting part of any modern day technology developer's collection. It gives vision, enthusiasm, possibilities and the ways to improve the future. I rate this book highly since it can be understood by even an average person...*

This book can be an exciting part of any modern day technology developer's collection. It gives vision, enthusiasm, possibilities and the ways to improve the future. I rate this book highly since it can be understood by even an average person. Or perhaps even by one who does not use computers and internet to a very great extent. It is an eye-opener for those who believe that the computer revolution is going to end very soon. I believe it has just begun!!

Being a research student I frequently use computers and internet. I sometimes get quite frustrated with the problems that come with computers. Every problem, be it a version related, software, connectivity or any other creates a dilemma. I wish the computer experts would be working long hours to solve many such problems.

Another thing that strikes me about computers is that with increased use of these machines people are becoming more impatient and aggressive. When your PC hangs and after typing a few commands you don't get it correct, you go out for help. You don't wait till it processes itself. The technological problems can only be sorted out through advancement in technology itself.

Prof. Shneiderman has shown his knowledge of various other things like speeches, etc. He recites some examples of *The Ten Commandments*, speeches of Thomas Jefferson, F. D. Roosevelt (page 78) etc.

The book covers wide range of topics like human relationships, education, business, politics and healthcare. Some last words for notes section, I recommend the readers to visit the www links given in the notes section to explore further and enrich your knowledge.

Finally, I suggest readers and those in the field of technology development to think towards developing technology for more humane cause. Reducing poverty, hunger, terror and fear. For, there is only one thing that can make human life better and that is peace and contentment and that can only be possible when we all together work hard for it.

This is a book which I can heartily recommend to all - be he a student, a researcher or just a housewife.

-Prateek Pandya



-Prateek Pandya
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-Editor-in-Chief