



Take a Number, Please!

In last week's story, I talked about how I consider my computer to be a 'life saver' for me, helping me to keep my life and work organized and running smoothly. I explained that because I am a person who always has trouble writing things down neatly and keeping them in order, I find the computer to be a fabulous tool.

But there is one area where it is far from clear that the computer is indeed a beneficial tool for me, and that is when it comes to numbers. Here, I have no 'built-in' weakness that requires the use of a computer to help me keep on top of things. I have always enjoyed number 'play', and when faced with a calculation, or a column of numbers to add up, do not automatically reach for an electronic calculator.

Don't get the wrong idea; I'm not one of those 'wizards' who can multiply two 12-digit numbers in his head in a few seconds to come up with the correct answer. That's way out of my league. But I can handle most of the calculations we come across in the course of daily life, and have always enjoyed looking at a calculation and figuring how it can be mentally broken into smaller chunks for easier processing.

I think perhaps our arithmetic teachers used to show us these tricks back in 'the old days', but when I tried to interest my own children in such things some years ago, they never really took to it. With computers and calculators always at hand for everybody, doing it 'in your head' seems destined to become an extinct skill.

And that sight we still occasionally see - a person flicking their fingers in the air as they manipulate an imaginary abacus to help them perform a mental calculation - will also no doubt soon be a thing of the past.

There is though, a silver lining in this cloud: because so few of today's youngsters have any skill at doing mental arithmetic, this gives us 'old folks' a chance to really show off! My daughter Fumi was watching me do some bookkeeping one day, and I added up a column of numbers by simply running my finger down it, grouping the figures into batches mentally, then writing the total at the bottom. She couldn't believe what she was seeing; "Dad, how did you *do* that?! You didn't even need a calculator!"

Well, if she wants to think that I have some 'special power', then that suits me just fine. Now that my kids are grown up, there aren't many places in life where I'm still able to impress them, so the longer I can hold onto this skill, the better!

In truth though, although quick mental calculation is an ability that most young people no longer have, they are making up for this by developing skills that previous generations never had: you

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have only to watch one of them manipulating the keys of their cell phone as they type a text message at blinding speed to realize that this is true. One skill lost ... another gained.

Am I perhaps the only person in Japan who is looking forward to the (inevitable) upcoming increase in the Consumption Tax? The one we currently have - 5% - is just too easy to calculate, and offers no challenge at all. They should raise it to 7%, or for a real challenge, maybe 6.5%. That'll give me something to chew on, and keep my brain in shape!

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