

# TIME

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## 10 Ideas That Are Changing The World

### #2 The End of Customer Service. With self-serve technology, you'll never have to see a clerk again

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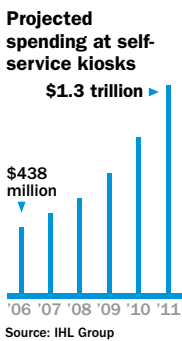
THE PEOPLE OF MEMPHIS HAD NEVER SEEN anything like it. When Clarence Saunders opened his first Piggly Wiggly in 1916, a grocery store was a place where you told the clerk behind the counter what you wanted and he fetched it. In Saunders' store, patrons roamed freely among shelves packed with goods. They took what they wanted and paid on the way out. The "self-serving store," as Saunders called it in his patent application, revolutionized retail, much as ATMs and pump-your-own gas later re-engineered other industries.

Yet it was all simply prelude. Only now are technology and public sentiment aligning to truly shift the responsibility of collecting goods and services to the consumer. Consider the last time you rang up your own purchase at Wal-Mart, checked into a hotel at a kiosk or bought a ticket from a machine in the lobby of a movie theater. Companies love self-service for the money it saves, and with consumers finally playing along, the need to interact with human beings is quickly disappearing.

Now that companies have gotten you used to the idea, they are poised to go all the way. The British retailer Tesco has opened dozens of its Fresh & Easy grocery stores in the U.S.: all the lanes are self-checkout.



**WHOM TO KNOW**  
**Bill Nuti**  
The CEO of NCR, which creates self-service systems, is influential in getting companies to adopt do-it-yourself technology



join the ranks of hospitals using check-in kiosks for emergency-room visits. Simply touch the image of the human body where

it hurts. By summer, Alaska Airlines will finish building its "Airport of the Future" in Seattle. The ticket counter has been obliterated; only islands of self-check-in kiosks remain. In Britain, NCR, a company that sells self-service systems, is trying out machines that let customers not only buy merchandise on their own but also return it. In Malaysia, IBM has outfitted a chain of sushi restaurants with ordering screens linked to the kitchen; so much for waitresses. And in Pennsylvania, Heritage Valley Health System will soon

it hurts.

Increased efficiency and cost savings aren't the only result. Slowly, we are separating services from the places where we are used to receiving them. Continental Airlines is testing a program that would allow PDA users to wirelessly check their flight's standby list. No need to talk to a counter agent anymore, let alone be in the same terminal. For supermarkets, Motorola makes a handheld scanner that customers carry around; it lets them ring up and bag groceries as they go.

Of course, clerks aren't completely going away. You just don't have to see them. "We've all had the pushy salesperson," says NCR CEO Bill Nuti. "Business will get smarter about when to serve you."

The less cheery way to look at it is that we're doing the work of employees without being paid. "The company is more productive, but we're shifting work to consumers. So from a macro perspective, are we more productive or less?" asks Mary Jo Bitner of the Center for Services Leadership at Arizona State University. And by adding all these new tasks to our daily routine, are we oversteering ourselves and reducing our quality of life? It's an interesting debate. Just don't expect to have it with a clerk. ■

**1902 Later, waiter**  
Based on a German idea, Horn & Hardart's Automat debuts in Philadelphia

**1916 A super market**  
Piggly Wiggly, the first self-serve grocery store, opens in Memphis

**1947 In the driver's seat**  
George Ulrich introduces self-pumped gas at his California service stations

**1967 Teller goodbye**  
Barclays bank installs one of the world's first ATMs at a London branch

**1995 Flying solo**  
Alaska Airlines sells an airplane ticket over the Internet for the first time



Risky Business:  
Eliot Spitzer's  
Self-Destruction



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For Our Times

# TIME

# 1



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