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Bits & Bytes

'We are the world, we are the computer makers'

CORPORATE computer research labs often are thought of as secretive places where a company's best scientists labor for years to come up with inventions their bosses can patent and sell for lots of money.

But Ted Selker, head of the fledgling User System Ergonomics Research group at IBM's Almaden Research Center in San Jose, disposed of that notion Tuesday when he invited 30 of his co-workers and about 20 outside experts to the center for a one-day symposium on the future of human interaction with computers. Looking at everything from computer-driven interactive television to the national data superhighway to future classrooms, Selker said he sees a burgeoning need for better ways to use computers and said collaboration among top researchers is the best way to invent them.

"We all pretend we're a bunch of competitors, and we have built up all these walls and confidentiality agreements," he said. "But I want to make it clear to my (non-IBM) colleagues that I expect to interact with them."

Making good on his word for what was billed as an annual event, Selker assembled an audience that included folks from Apple Computer, Xerox, Hewlett-Packard, Interval Research, Sun, Stanford University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Selker, who spent six years in IBM's Yorktown, N.Y., labs developing an in-keyboard mouse replacement called the Trackpoint, said the computer business got too closed in the greedy 1980s, and he wants to go back to the days when ideas were more freely exchanged. Why not worry your best ideas will just be stolen? Well, consider that the eraser head-like Trackpoint started out as a "six-week science fair project," Selker said, and turned into six years' labor — including last-minute help from his father, a materials scientist, to come up with a rubber compound that had the right "feel" and could also be manufactured efficiently.

"There's a tremendous difference between having an idea . . . and really building it so it has some performance," he said. "That's ten times more work."

