

THE VOICE MAGAZINE

Volume 16 Issue 34
August 29, 2008

A Real Deal?

Customer reward
cards

The Interviewer

The simple things

B-Sides

Lagwagon

Plus:

*Careers,
The Mindful Bard,
From Where I Sit,
and much more...*



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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We love to hear from you! Send your questions and comments to voice@ausu.org, and please indicate if we may publish your letter.



CONSUMER LIFE

Sandra Livingston

**Customer Loyalty Cards: A real deal?**

Chances are, if you open your purse or wallet right now, you'll find at least one or two of those shiny plastic cards, the kind that let you collect points every time you buy coffee or airline tickets or dog food.

And depending on which customer loyalty programs you use, the rewards sound fabulous. With every swipe of the plastic, you can "show yourself some love," "start enjoying the savings," or even "imagine the possibilities."

It all sounds thrillingly close to nirvana (or maybe just loads of free stuff, which for some shoppers is one and the same).

But what about that old adage, there's no such thing as a free lunch?

Are the corporate decision makers really sitting around trying to figure out ways to give you, the loyal customer, free vacations, gas, and other goodies as a way to say "Gee, thanks," for spending your cash on a particular store or brand?

Not really, because like many a deal, the devil is in the details, and odds are that you're giving away a whole lot more than you're getting.

The first thing to remember is that stores and services are in business for one reason only: to make a profit. From employee benefit plans to the price of electricity, the cost of running that business is built into the price you pay at the checkout—and that includes the cost of the hardware, software, and administrative expenses of operating a loyalty program.

So as exciting as it may be to chock up enough points to redeem on 20 dollars worth of merchandise, don't think you haven't already paid for it.

In fact, loyalty programs may end up costing you *more*. As a 2005 *Consumer Affairs* article reports, "stores that use loyalty card programs actually increase the regular prices of items for non-club members, making purchases more expensive for all buyers and reducing the margin of card members' saving to almost nothing."

A CBC *Marketplace* investigation turned up similar results. On a single day, they bought the same 10 items at four different stores, using a customer rewards card at one of them. The result was that, in spite of the perception of savings attached to these cards, the total bill using the rewards card was higher than the other three; in one case, by just over 42 per cent.

For the stores, however, running a loyalty program has a valuable payoff: information. And not just a little bit of information; heaps of it, terabytes of "dynamic, detailed data."

That data isn't hard to come by, either. Although application forms differ, consumers are happy to hand over their names, addresses, phone numbers, birthdates, employers, kids' birthdates, bank account numbers, and more. So what do the stores do with it? Make more money by targeting customers with special offers and, in some cases, selling the data to marketing partners.

Which leads to the issue of privacy.

Even if you're one of those people who don't really care how much private info you're handing over to a corporate database ("I don't have anything to hide," you shrug), you may want to think again: the medicine, alcohol, or plane tickets you buy could one day be used to build a case against you, or even affect your chances of winning a lawsuit against someone else.

An *LA Times* article reported on the case of plaintiff Robert Rivera. In 1996, the Los Angeles man slipped on some spilled yogurt in a Vons grocery store, falling and shattering his kneecap. He sued the store for negligence, and the case would have faded into legal obscurity except for an interesting claim Rivera made: during the pre-trial phase, he said the store had used his club discount card to look up his past spending habits and threatened to use his history of alcohol purchases against him in court.

The store denied it, but even if they didn't resort to such a tactic in this case, the possibility raises some disturbing questions. With all that data at their fingertips, what's to stop a corporation from using it against a customer to defend against a lawsuit?

After all, the company owns the information it's collected about you. And the information was handed over willingly, every time you swiped that card at the checkout. Even if you're confident that the companies behind your loyalty cards would never use that data against you, they may not have a choice: government agencies could demand it.

In the US, that scenario has already happened. As the *Marketplace* report noted, a grocery store in Arizona "turned over records of some of its shoppers purchasing plastic sandwich bags."

Apparently, the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) was trying to use customer loyalty records to find people who were buying lots of sandwich bags—the logic being, of course, that the bags weren't being used for a community bake sale. In the face of a subpoena, the store had no choice but to hand over the customer data it had been collecting.

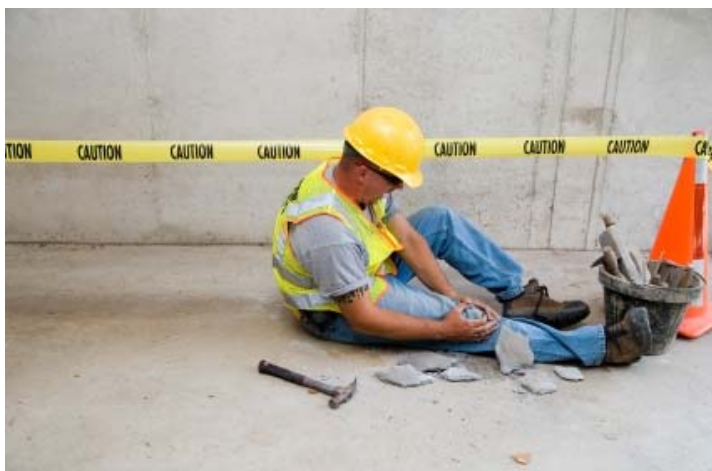
Besides the hidden costs, some customer reward programs are also adding insult to injury: US Airways has recently added an "Award Processing Fee" to its program. Now, when program members redeem their Dividend Miles, the value of those miles is eroded by between \$25 (continental US/Alaska/Canada) and \$50 dollars (Hawaii or international flights).

Even if you don't get charged a redemption fee, you might be surprised at exactly what the stores think your loyalty is worth. For one major Canadian grocery brand, it isn't much. If you use your no-fee bank card to buy their products, you'll earn five points for every dollar spent. Sounds good, but to get one dollar in stuff you need 1,000 points—a reward of just half a cent on your dollar.

Still, most customer loyalty programs aim to create a sense of fun, and lots of customers are happy to play along in exchange for the exhilarating moment when they've finally been loyal enough to earn their "free" prize at the checkout. But the final word is neatly summed up in *Marketplace's* interview with Katherine Albrecht, at the time a Harvard University student completing her doctoral thesis on loyalty cards. In all of her research, she had "been unable to find a single consumer benefit from using these cards."

CAREERS

Behdin Nowrouzi



Occupational Injuries: A brief introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 120 million occupational accidents with two million fatalities are estimated to occur globally each year.

As well, up to 157 million new cases of occupational diseases may be caused by various exposures at work, yet the number of people with access to remedial occupational health services is also very limited.

In fact, even in industrialized and developed countries, only 20 to 50 per cent may have such a privilege.

Occupational injury is widely recognized as a leading contributor to work disability, a situation that has been well documented in the scientific literature. Estimates of the economic costs associated with lost work days following injuries occurring in a single year exceed \$95 billion.

Surprisingly, despite these high costs, there have been few attempts at delineating the factors associated with delayed return to work (RTW).

In the United States the figures are similar, with approximately 4.5 million occupational injuries reported in 2003, representing about one in 20 full time workers.

Approximately half of these injuries resulted in disabilities requiring recuperation away from work or restricted activities during work hours. In the US, the total cost of work-related back pain in the year 1992 has been estimated at \$49.2 billion, representing 34 per cent of all direct and indirect costs of occupational injuries.

While only a small proportion of work injuries result in substantial disability and a lengthy time away from work, these injuries have the greatest emotional, social, and economic consequences.

The National Occupational Research Agenda (NORA), established by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, named "social and economic consequences of workplace illness and injury" as one of the 21 priorities for the 21st century.

There are direct costs and indirect costs associated with all workplace injuries, and according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, every year workplace injuries, illnesses, and deaths cost the US economy \$170 billion.

In 2001, the economic burden in the US from over-exertion injuries (injuries caused by excessive pushing, pulling, lifting, holding, or carrying) resulted in \$9.8 billion in direct costs, while repetitive motion injuries totalled \$2.3 billion in direct costs, and the indirect costs associated with these ergonomic injuries accounted for \$39 billion.

In Canada, it is estimated that workplace injuries cost the economy between 10 and 20 billion dollars each year. In 2003, there were approximately 800,000 workplace injuries and illnesses reported by the Association of Workers' Compensation Boards of Canada (AWCBC), representing approximately one in 16 Canadians.

In Ontario, an average of 356,528 work-related injuries occurred each year over the 10-year period from 1996 to 2005. The number of reported injuries remained unchanged from 2002 to 2005, at just over 350,000.

In the past decade, rates of workplace injury resulting in wage-replacement compensation for lost time have declined by approximately half in the province of Ontario, just as they have in many other jurisdictions in North America.

There is substantial uncertainty about the causes of this decline, and controversy about the extent to which the reduction in rates of lost-time wage-replacement claims corresponds to an underlying reduction in the incidence of workplace injury.

In Ontario, disability benefit payments are contingent on the treating physician completing a form certifying disability.

But while the province pays physician treatment in a fee-for-service funding arrangement, less tangible (in terms of actual dollars) are the costs of a personal and social nature, such as self-esteem or the impact on community and family responsibilities and roles.

Patients with serious work-related injuries often experience long hospital stays and consume substantial amounts of medical and hospital services.

Currently, workers' compensation considerations in Canada includes rising costs, workplace and workforce changes, and the changing nature of injury claims. For instance, in 1999, soft-tissue musculoskeletal disorders, such as back pain and repetitive strain injuries of the upper limbs, accounted for between 40 and 60 per cent of the 379,395 accepted lost-time claims in Canada.

This important occupational and public health issue deserves greater attention, and more research and emphasis must examine the relationship between work-related injuries and prevention and timely return to work.

Total Number of Claims Reported from 1996 to 2005, Ontario	
Year	Total Claims
1996	345,606
1997	341,178
1998	342,687
1999	364,069
2000	379,097
2001	371,067
2002	361,179
2003	354,926
2004	352,474
2005	352,996
<i>Adapted from the Association of Workers' Compensation Boards of Canada, 2007</i>	

The Interviewer

It is the ninth decade of the twentieth century...

written and illustrated by Mondo Waterman St. Louis

Caramel Baby #8: Simple White Pleasures

Yeah, I work hard,
but I play hard, too.

It's one fancy house, but Wayne's a CEO.

Reuben wonders how Wayne would react to a visit to his room on Henry Street.

I just don't think people like
us should have to suffer like this.

That's JUST
what I was
thinking!

Shhh!!

The mood
becomes
more affable
as Wayne
opens up
about his
politics...

*Lemme tell ya how a fella can
get ahead in this business.*

Host and company enjoy muzak...

Is that- 'Blowin'
in the Wind'??!

Yeah! It's
the only
version I've
ever liked.

Same
here!!!

Say, have you
heard the muzak
version of
'I Wanna Be
Sedated'?

...and fake white panelling and a fake fireplace and
white Russians and other simple white pleasures...

...and soon Reuben has booked an interview.

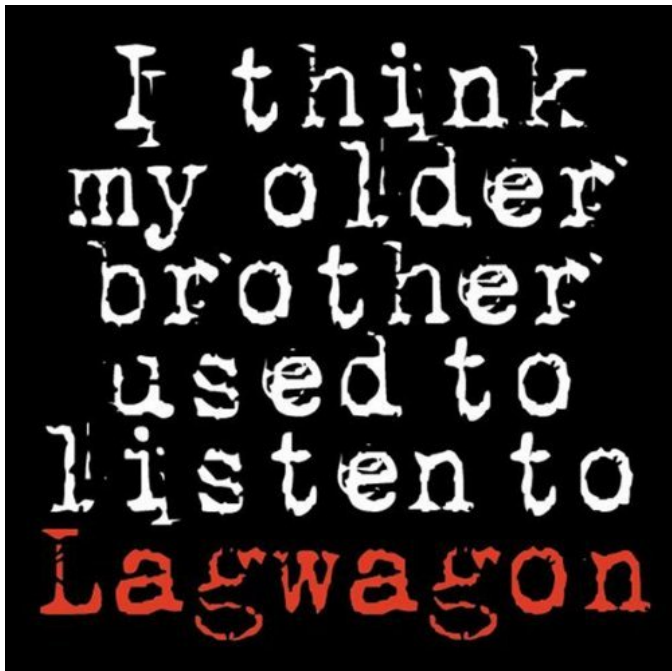
I think CKDU's
listeners would
like to hear
your views.

Really?!!

Next: Jumping Ahead

MUSIC TO EAT LUNCH TO

Mandy Gardner



Lagwagon – *I Think My Older Brother Used to Listen to Lagwagon*

Release Date: August 18, 2008

Label: Fat Wreck Chords

Tracks: 7

Rating: 7

Lagwagon is in many ways the flagship of Fat Wreck Chords. The first band to sign to the label aside from the obvious inclusion NOFX, Lagwagon has been one of the most loyal bands to Fat Wreck Chords, and the five California punk musicians have done Fat Mike proud without fail.

I Think My Older Brother Used to Listen to Lagwagon

is a tribute to the lengthy career Lagwagon has spent not only with Fat Wreck Chords but in the music scene in general. Unsurprisingly, the band chose the album title with its usual sense of humour; however, the content of the record is less funny than a fan would expect.

I Think My Older Brother Used to Listen to Lagwagon is short and to the point, featuring a mere seven tracks. Despite the lack of length (the entire record plays for no more than 19 minutes), there are those basic, necessary aspects of a Lagwagon album that shine through strongly enough to quell the anger at what first seems like a missing half hour of top-quality music.

"B-Sides" is the first song on the playlist, and within seconds Lagwagon fans will find themselves smiling at the guitar harmonics, Joey Cape's unmistakable vocals and lyrics, and the pure, clear melody that has come to define this band.

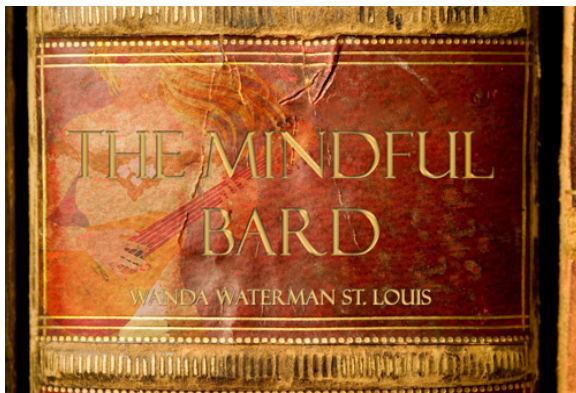
The incendiary lyrics, as usual, say it all, layered over literally perfect musical composition and performance:

"Think about it, the world defines you. Think about it, think about it all; you should be depressed but no little pill will make any difference," from "No Little Pill."

One major element of the music on every Lagwagon record to date is the obvious humour that is incorporated into an otherwise serious, socially oriented sound. If you are familiar with Lagwagon, you will already know that the band is equated with so-called funny political and social songs that not only get the audience riled up for a good show and wholehearted social activism, but make us all laugh simultaneously at the ludicrousness of the world around us.

I can't help but feel that if *I Think My Older Brother Used to Listen to Lagwagon* were only the length of a regular album, Lagwagon would have been able to work this normal, expected humour into the record.

Of course, maybe this was the point of the endeavour. Who can say?



Books, Music, and Film to Wake Up Your Muse and Help You Change the World

Book: Elisa Albert, *The Book of Dahlia*

Publication date: 2008

Publisher: Free Press (Simon & Schuster): New York

Cancer is hastening Dahlia Finger's demise. As she unrolls the scroll of her final days beside the scroll of her previous life history you can't help but say, "Wait a minute, Dahlia—we're

all going to die. You're just dying early. You're being forced to face the same existential dilemma we'll all face sooner or later; you just have less time to deal with it. Why is this such a catastrophe?"

Why? Because the story of a premature death is the perfect vehicle for a meditation on the absurdity of human mortality.

The Book of Dahlia wrestles with this absurdity despite presenting humans as the creatures most likely to deserve death. Cases in point: Dahlia's monstrously egotistical mother; her sadistic brother and his toxic fiancé; a series of shallow lovers; and Dahlia herself—a bitter, self-indulgent, materially spoiled but emotionally starved underachiever.

In the end, despite the depths of their depravity, do humans really deserve to die?

"Life is still Life," says Dahlia in an imaginary conversation with a cancer guru. "And either that's meaningful all the time or it's meaningful none of the time, schmuck; no qualifying."

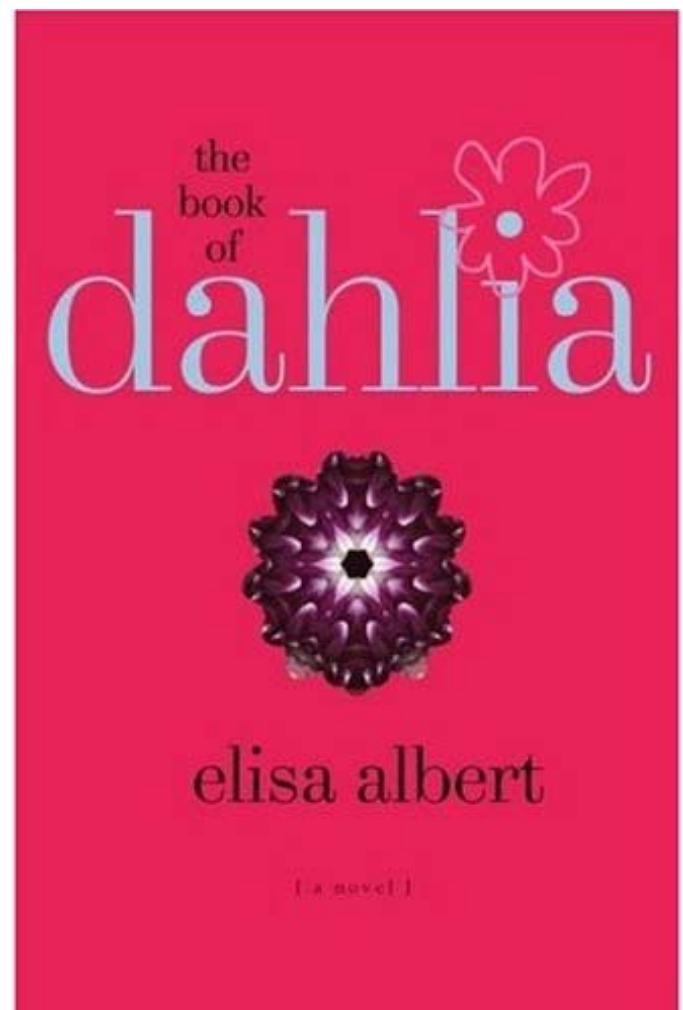
Which raises The Question: How is life meaningful?

Or: How does one face death without faith, without the transcendent, without the spiritual, without the psychobabble?

Or: How does one face death when all one has to face it with *is* life—blaring, bright, stupid, unfixable life?

The life of pavement, of car upholstery, of comfy couches, of street noise, of plentiful fast food, of America's almighty consumerist tit from which every faintest whiff of death is rigorously banished?

Albert wrestles with these questions in conversational prose. That's how novelists *should* write, provided they write in the *hypothetical* conversational style of those who always speak very well. Albert's narrator/protagonist does not speak well but she speaks in such



a way that you know you've heard these words before; you've had these very thoughts, in close to these very words.

Albert writes the way we think when we're ruminating on our personal helplessness. In her inner world, for example, Dahlia's health becomes the fulcrum between all the good and ill done her by others, between the success and failure of her environment to meet her needs.

This doesn't jibe with externals. According to everyone else Dahlia's cancer is the sum and product of all her guilt: guilt for not having taken care of herself the way the experts (repeatedly confusing correlation for causation) say she should; guilt for bad (i.e., negative, i.e., unfeminine) attitudes; guilt for being unlovable; and guilt for not living up to her potential.

But like Job (or a strange, modern anti-Job) Dahlia resists all efforts to comprehend her illness as metaphor, all attempts to make her feel her tumour was somehow her fault and the outcome of her illness somehow under her control.

Albert writes from within the twisted pain of aggrieved gifted women. Her writing screams with belly laughter, agony, and lust. It carries the signs of a necessary shift in cultural awareness.

The Book of Dahlia manifests seven of *The Mindful Bard's* criteria for books well worth reading: 1) it is authentic, original, and delightful; 2) it confronts, rebukes, and mocks existing injustices; 3) it makes me want to be a better artist; 4) it displays an engagement with and compassionate response to suffering; 5) it ponders the attainment of the true self; 6) it stimulates my mind; and 7) it poses and admirably responds to questions which have a direct bearing on my view of existence.

CLICK OF THE WRIST – Back to School

Every season has its unique sights and sounds: gentle rain showers in spring, glistening snow banks in winter, and the swooshing of credit cards at the height of back-to-school season. In honour of all those students—from kindergarten to grad school—here's a look at some of the stranger aspects of education.

Funny School Excuses - According to this blog, all of these notes excusing students from class were written by actual parents. I don't know about that, but *this* one is certainly believable: "Please excuse Jimmy for being. It was his father's fault."

Metaphors in High School Essays - Analogy, simile, or metaphor—they're all equally hilarious, like this little gem: "He fell for her like his heart was a mob informant, and she was the East River."

Bad School Photos - These have been up on the *Ellen Degeneres* site for a while now, but in case you haven't seen them be prepared for the horror. All I want to know is, who the heck combed that poor kid's hair?

Youngest College Professor - At 18, Alia Sabur was recognized as the world's youngest-ever professor, breaking a 300-year-old record set by Colin Maclaurin in 1717.

Ten Worst Student Essay Topics - The assignment was simple enough: compose a 500-word essay on a subject that interests you. Any subject. Bet the professor wasn't counting on such inspired thinking as "Fun Things to Do at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport."



From Where I Sit

Hazel Anaka

Movin' On

In August 1996 our son Greg moved into a ground floor apartment walking distance from NAIT. I had lovingly selected this first home-away-from-home building for its location and no-nonsense landlady.

Because he hated the strict rules of the surrogate mother (a.k.a. landlady) he was on the move again the following August. This time he and his cousin picked a top-floor suite facing west and onto a busy thoroughfare.

With never-ending traffic noise, temperatures rivalling hell, and three flights of stairs they were gone again in August. I guess dragging the large Sklar-Peppler sofa down three floors wasn't that appealing because apparently the Salvation Army became the recipient of that piece of furniture.

Eventually I lost track of where Greg moved, who he lived with, and what other worldly goods he abandoned along the way. We weren't estranged or anything; he just started making those decisions himself and parental visits weren't, ahem, encouraged. It was about 2000 or 2001 when he told us he was moving in with Carrie "because she needed a roommate."

Apparently we looked like we'd just fallen off the turnip truck. In August of 2002 Greg and Carrie moved into their first home as newlyweds.

In the meantime, Hilary was coming along in the world. Her first move, in August, was to live with Greg and Carrie. The following August she moved to a suite just off Whyte Avenue. The next August she moved into her grandfather's condo with a cousin. In August 2006 she bought her own condo and we thought we were finally done with the August moves.

It was becoming onerous because, unlike Greg, Hilary didn't leave any possessions behind. Each time there was more, and dad and I aren't getting any younger.

Is it even possible to believe that here we are moving baby girl yet again in August? She's bought a bigger condo in a better neighbourhood. So for the past few weeks we've been psyching up and prepping for what we pray is the final move for at least 10 years or until she's married, whichever comes first.

As I spent a day wrapping decorative pieces I noticed a helluva lot of vases. On closer examination it became painfully clear that I'd given her most of them. Is this poetic justice or what? I love the decorating, home décor aspect of these moves.

Picking the right shade of Benjamin Moore paint. Re-covering cushions. Displaying prized possessions. Making it all work. Repurposing old stuff, scoring deals at second-hand stores or garage sales. Creating custom art for the final finishing touch. Turning bland spaces into gorgeous places.

So if next week you see me dragging my ass—limping, wounded, or waiting for a massage—you'll know the final August move is complete. August 2008, that is. Though I am pretty excited about the paint and fabric swatches in my purse. Maybe movin' on ain't so bad after all, from where I sit.

AUSU This Month



Merchandise Still for Sale

We still have some locks and memory keys available for sale. Both of these were designed with ease of mailing in mind, which means they're small enough to be easily stored pretty much anywhere. The wristband USB key is a unique way to carry around your assignments, online materials, and even emails while you're on the go. With a 1 gigabyte capacity, it can even handle a good chunk of your music collection, and the design means you no longer have to worry about losing it. *The Voice* memory key has less capacity (512 MB) but the dark, flip-top design is classy enough to accompany you anywhere.

AUSU Lock Loan Program

Still running, and still popular, the lock loan program can allow you to rest easy knowing your valuables are safe if you're taking an exam at the Calgary or Edmonton campus. The locks can be set to any combination, and are loaned to people without any deposit, but we ask that you please remember to reset them to 0-0-0 before returning them so that we can continue this program.

Employment Site is here!

Many of you will already have seen the link to our new employment site on the front page, and while there are not a lot of employers in evidence yet, it's a great opportunity to get your resume, skills, and talents in there. The Personnel Department is busily working on finding employers who could use your unique abilities as a distance education student. Be sure yours are available to get the early opportunities!



Appointments

AUSU VP External, Barb Rielly, has stepped down from her position as chair of the AUSU Awards Committee, and new Councillor Bethany Porter has taken on the role. Council wishes Bethany good luck in this position, which can involve making some hard decisions.

Increasing AUSU's representation within AU, VP Finance and Administration, Sarah Kertcher, has been appointed to AU's integrated learning centre steering committee. This committee will examine the possibility of integrating all AU sites in the Edmonton Area into one building. Sarah will ensure that the committee keeps concerns of our members with respect to ease of access and exam conditions as well as AUSU's own special needs for storage and physical office space well in mind.

The MyAU steering committee sees two new AUSU representatives, President Karl Low, and VP External Barb Rielly, joining to provide their input on how MyAU could be better structured to meet your needs. If there's something that's been bugging you about the MyAU system, now is a great time to call or email our office and let them know. We'll be sure to bring your concerns forward.

SmartDraw Program Continues

If you haven't yet, you might want to download a copy of SmartDraw. AUSU has purchased a licence agreement to supply the award-winning SmartDraw software to all AUSU members (current undergraduate students). To access this deal and find out more, visit the front page of our website.

SmartDraw allows you to create a wide range of graphics for your assignments and submit them electronically in a Word file. You can also place your graphics in Excel or PowerPoint files, or export them as TIF, GIF, or JPEG files to make a web graphic or even a logo. Just a few of the graphics you can make include Venn diagrams, genetics charts, graphs, organizational and flow charts, and Gantt charts.

For any course that requires charts that cannot be easily created in Word or Excel, this should be a real time saver and make it easier to submit all portions of an assignment by email. Remember, though, that you should always check with your tutor to find out if there is a specific format he or she prefers. Your tutor does not have to have SmartDraw to view these graphics, however.

Installations under this program are good for one year. The package includes both the Standard and Health Care editions of SmartDraw.

AUSU Handbook/Planner 2008 has a few copies left!

We still have a number of copies of the 2008 AUSU planner available. We're getting closer to the end of the year, however, so our supplies are steadily decreasing. We've added a few enhancements this year, including cheat sheets for common citation styles, a clip-in page-marker ruler, and a funky fridge magnet to remind you to get your weekly dose of *The Voice*.

As always, we're excited to know what you think of the planner, and especially want to hear of any improvements you think could be made.

Chat with a Councillor

Have a beef? Want to know where your \$8 per course goes or who's trying to make it work for you? Check out the AUSU chat times on our front page. Every Councillor has agreed to spend an hour each week making themselves available to you for your questions, concerns, or just to shoot the breeze while you take a break from your studying. It's not only a great way for you to learn more about what AUSU can do for you, but for us to learn what you want from AUSU. We hope to see you there!



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SmartDraw

INTERNATIONAL NEWS DESK



At Home: Eastern Health offers patient shuffle as health care solution

As the recent cancer-testing scandal revealed, Newfoundland and Labrador's health care system is in a woeful state, and the latest move by Eastern Health seems destined to add to the problem.

Currently, there's a serious bed shortage for hospital patients in the province. As the [CBC](#) reports, nurses have long called on the government to fix the problem as "sick and elderly patients line up on stretchers in emergency room corridors while waiting for a space."

Eastern Health, the province's largest health authority, has offered a Band-Aid: move overflow patients out of hospitals and into personal care homes. In mid-August, Eastern Health put out a call for tenders from personal care homes, but the pilot project has several potential problems.

First, although doctors and nurses in the province agree that some action is necessary, they're concerned that this temporary solution will have a negative effect on patient care, and that a

more permanent solution is necessary. Debbie Forward, president of the Newfoundland and Labrador Nurses Union, told reporters the government must find a long-term resolution beyond the six-month pilot program.

"This is a Band-Aid, but I think you need a bigger picture, which is government's issues around the direction of health services in the province, because we don't have an adequate home-care system."

And without an adequate home-care system to start with, filling beds with hospital patients is only going to add to the frustrations of people who are already on waiting lists to get into those homes.

Follow-up care of hospital patients is another potential problem area. The CBC reports that Dr. Elizabeth Callahan, president of the Newfoundland and Labrador Medical Association, has questioned "what sort of care patients who are transferred out of the hospital will receive in a care home."

"There are lots of inherent problems," Callahan said. "Who actually looks after the patient there, do they go back to their family doctor? Are they looked after by the doctor who looks after patients in that home? In that situation, it could fragment the patient's care."

With an initial goal of moving 50 patients per year from hospitals to personal-care homes, the six-month pilot project could be extended after a review.

In Foreign News: Senator Barack Obama clinches Democratic Party nomination

It may have seemed like a foregone conclusion, but Barack Obama's nomination by the Democratic Party on August 27 was a truly historic event. Not only is he the first African-American to become a major party nominee for president, his nomination also signalled the end of a long-running political dominance held by two powerful Democratic families: the Kennedys and the Clintons.

The freshman Illinois senator won the nomination with a total of 1,549 votes, compared with 231 for Hilary Clinton.

In spite of the often-heated rhetoric during the Democratic primaries, both Bill and Hilary Clinton publicly backed Obama at the convention and, as the *New York Times* reports, it was Hilary Clinton who “moved that the roll call be suspended and that Mr. Obama be declared the party’s nominee by acclamation.”

Obama has already signalled his choice for running mate: Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr. of Delaware.

It’s expected that Biden’s presence will be a valuable asset in the Democratic camp during the run-up to the general election. While Obama only became a member of the United States Senate less than four years ago, the presumptive Republican nominee, John McCain, is running on a platform that stresses experience, portraying him as “an experienced conservative leader in the tradition of Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan.”

The US general election will be held November 4, and with both parties’ primaries soon wrapping up, the 2008 presidential race will continue to be one to watch.

EDUCATION NEWS

Sean Steels



Computer program tops Las Vegas’s best pro poker players

University of Alberta scientists create a computer capable of complex decision making

EDMONTON (CUP) -- The phrase “artificial intelligence” has been synonymous with science fiction films for decades. But thanks to the hard work of a University of Alberta artificial intelligence research team, the next time you hear about AI might be at a poker table.

Earlier this month, at the Gaming Life Expo in Las Vegas, Nevada, the team pitted their poker playing computer program, named Polaris, against a pool of pros in limit Texas Hold’em poker and took the hypothetical pot.

“It was pretty crazy,” said Michael Bowling, the team’s leader and an assistant professor in the Department of Computing Science.

“Last year we tried it at an artificial intelligence conference in Vancouver and were barely squeezed out. We only played two players, but this year there were seven different professionals who teamed up for a multitude of matches.”

And Bowling wasn’t the only one impressed.

"Everyone who sat down to play the program has been in awe that it plays as strongly as it does. A lot of the players came into it [thinking], 'Hey, it's a poker program. It's not going to be that good.' I think everyone walked away with a definite appreciation for just how well it plays," Bowling said.

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Polaris functions using two general components: a game theoretic component, which devises a strategy for success by playing billions of hands against itself before a match; and a learning component, which determines what playing style its opponent is using in order to adapt its neutral, game-theoretic strategy to one of five strategy types ranging from very defensive to very aggressive.

Advancements to Polaris' learning component, Bowling explains, are what brought the program up to snuff from last year's loss.

"We had a really weak learning component in one of the matches we played [in Vancouver]," Bowling said. "In the last 12 months we've developed it considerably, and have a fairly sophisticated learning system to adapt among our five strategies. The adaptation can occur very quickly now, in about 50 hands."

But it's Polaris' game theoretic engine and the nature of poker that make the program so unique among other AI programs built to solve games of seemingly similar complexity, such as chess and checkers.

"Poker just happens to capture a lot of really interesting aspects of real-world problems. Mainly, that there is a great deal of uncertainty in any decision," Bowling said.

"For example, in poker, you are uncertain about what cards your player has, what cards will come up, [and] what style your opponent is using. All of those same uncertainties exist in many problems that we make decisions on everyday and handle very well, whereas most computers don't handle those uncertainties very well."

In poker, because the opponents' cards, as well as the potential flop (cards coming out of the deck) are unknown, it's currently impossible to compute all game possibilities and arrive at a theoretically optimal solution, Bowling explains.

In the future, this type of risk-calculating program could also be applied in real-world scenarios to combat human indecision in the face of uncertain variables, he continued.

"One impact this could have in the future is with economic decision-making, which fits really well with poker situations. For example, it could be used to help in auction scenarios where a number of parties are bidding on products and making decisions while facing unknowns like opponent's desires and future availability of products," Bowling said.

"For all of those decisions which we already model in a game theoretic way, we now have a much better tool to make decisions in those scenarios," he said.

Polaris constructs a smaller approximation of the game that captures many of poker's strategies and fits its small world solution to its current game—similar to the way people make complex decisions.

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