

CeBIT: Last Man Standing

Written by Bob Snyder
24 March 2010



The end of the long walkway from train station to CeBIT entrance...and a long way to still go to Hall 14...

Heinz Nixdorf died on the fairgrounds at CeBIT. That thought keeps coming back to me. And he probably had minions to carry his bags.

It's 8pm on the evening before CeBIT 2010 officially opens and I am exhausted from laboriously dragging my too-many bags from the train station at Hannover-Laatzen across the people-mover bridge to the Hannover fairgrounds.

All the important folks are in warm seats at the Opening Ceremony but I am late, cold and walking into the show. The Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, is on stage tonight which tells you how important the CeBIT show is in Germany.

I descend from the covered people-mover that arches high over the flat landscape, wondering if my final distance will be 2km or 4 km by the time I reach my Hall. CeBIT takes the measure of a man.

Outdoors now, the cold hits me. It's a penetrating Northern cold...the type that bites your nose instead of nibbling your ears.

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Jorg Schaumburg, the man who ran CeBIT for most of its run as the world's largest IT exhibition, once told me: "Early March weather is better than later March in Hannover." He showed weather bureau statistics to prove this, of course, but in my experience...late March, mid-March, early-March, they are all equally terrible in weather. For years, I have been snowed on, rained on, sleeted, hailed and blown across the CeBIT fairgrounds with clear and sunny days being as rare as black swans.



Friday's snow from my apartment looking to CeBIT fairgrounds

My four bags, packed for a week of CeBIT, plus material for the stand (and my computers) grow heavy from pulling. My feet are freezing, my arms ache, and it has been a long way from the train station. I am thinking, "I am getting too old for this. I should have just gone straight to the apartment."

The fairgrounds are dark and empty except for the slow traffic of trucks and vans. Several small groups of foreign exhibitors, always Asian, pass me but going in the opposite direction. They

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are headed out of CeBIT.

For me, it marks 28 trips inward (if I include the time when CeBIT was still part of Hannover Industry Messe, and just the top floor of Hall 8.

The math comes to me quicker than the directions to Hall 14 where Planet Reseller is re-located this year. The sum of the time I have spent in my life on the CeBIT fairgrounds is at least 5 months. Longer than the time I once lived in Chicago between job transfers.

You can't help but reflect upon the changes here. I pass the space where Siemens Mobile had once put up a \$2m building just to host wave-riding champions in a surfing demo. Hard to imagine surfers tonight, as I pull up my collar and think snow is in our future this year.

Hall 13 seems to be the longest hall as I trek past it. I remember when it opened: we all thought it was so distant, so remote from the action, so far from the gravitas of Hall 1.

When it was built in 1970, Hall 1 was the largest single exhibition hall in the world. Hall 1 was for Tier 1 only: these guys had leased their space there. IBM had an elevator in its stand that shot executives up to their level in rank. On the rooftop of Hall 1 were private suites that eluded most visitors unless you received a private invite.

I don't miss Hall 1. Rather embarrassing but year after year, I would get lost in Hall 1. Personally I think Hall 1 was the reason the industry invented satnav: just to escape the maze.

Back then, Hall 2 was not the new building you see now. The Convention Center was not up. Hall 6 was home to the famous USA Pavilion that actually outgrew Hall 6 and split into several pavilions. Back then, it was a major attraction for distributors and resellers looking for the latest.

So much has changed. People ask me how long I've been coming to CeBIT. (And is it the grey beard that provokes this question?) When I tell them my answer of 28 years, they always

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respond, "You must know your way around by now."

The fact is...not really. Lately each year the Deutsche Messe rearranges their halls and subject matter and the veterans are reduced to tourists, studying maps in advance, plotting the nearest entrance, a convenient food place, a parking spot...

The CeBIT experience is all about trying to manage your logistics.

You could call Hannover Messe "the fairground built by the IT industry," just as you can call Detroit the city built by the automotive industry. The IT industry drove the construction, financed the expansion, and once occupied every available square meter of the Messe.

We jammed its aisles, clogged its car parks, swamped its restaurants and choked its entrances and exits. Nearly 7000 exhibitors and 700,000 visitors at its peak.



IBM, now in Hall 2

It's ironic that CeBIT outgrew its birthparent, the Hannover Fair --an industrial trade show...and yet today's head of CeBIT (and head of Deutsche Messe) was once the show director of Hannover Messe. And before that, he was a young man assigned to escort another young man

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(me) around the Industrial Messe. Now Ernst Raue runs a CeBIT that's under the gun.

CeBIT is no longer at its peak. Instead it is "peak-ed."

The press are quick to point out the shrinkage in exhibitors. CeBIT lost more exhibitors in one year than most IT shows have ever seen. Today most visitors with any CeBIT experience start a conversation with, "Did you see how many halls are closed?"

Less traffic now, claim other visitors. I often hear, "CeBIT is going the way of Comdex, the way of the dinosaur. Big trade shows have lost relevance. Nobody likes coming to Hannover, a boring place."

There's a litany of claims and they all come to mind as I waddle, penguin-like, coaxing my wheeled bags towards the front entrance of Hall 14. There's a calm before this storm, a quiet of anticipation before the start of CeBIT 2010.

There's a giant balanced cube with Deutsche Telekom branding that stands on edge across from my entrance at Hall 14. I remember the year the cube was erected, another marvel to impress visitors. On the other side of the cube is a Guinness Book record: the world's longest pedestrian bridge that runs from between Halls 8 and 9 and carries over the highway, landing near the new area built for the World's Fair in 2000. There's even a sports arena over there...

Had CeBIT not stopped growing after 2000 (remember the dot.com blow-up?), I am sure we would have conquered all that new area. In 2000, Cisco already had its exhibit over that bridge. You had to exit the show just to visit Cisco!

My arduous journey from Laatzen train station with luggage somehow strikes me as a parable for my own CeBIT journey.

CeBIT has now taken over the slot Comdex once occupied: The Show We Love to Hate.

And it is the logistics we hate most. We complain about the lack of hotel space. Staying in people's apartments loses its charm for most of us after several years. The impressive Munich Beer Hall that may have held attraction in our formative years is but a stale draft to imbue now. The long walks with bags, with rain blowing in your face or snow at your feet (or some days, both!) seem so much harder as time drags on.



Tired not wired: Munich Beer Hall, behind Hall 3 on CeBIT Fairgrounds

How many of us wish the world's largest IT show could be in some warm, easy place like a Barcelona...Monte Carlo...Rome.

Make our lives easier, not harder...this is a strange request from the same masochistic/sadistic species that inhabits the IT sector. But the IT business has been a hard trek and the survivors and veterans seek comfort, look for respite... no longer embracing a hostile environment as just another challenge on the path to IT success.

Hard as it tries, CeBIT fails to appease the critics.

Standing outside the door of Hall 14, poised at the entrance, I can look up and see the bright constellation of Cassiopeia in the northern German sky. The Queen Cassiopeia of the

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mythological realm, was beautiful but also arrogant and vain; these latter two characteristics led to her downfall. Here, over CeBIT, it hangs as a reminder

At times, in the past, the powerful CeBIT was vain and arrogant. Kicking out the office products industry...asking Sony to remove Xbox and instructing Microsoft to take away Xbox...banishing home products to an attempted CeBIT Home in Dresden...telling IT distributors they were parasites and forbidding them stand space to re-sell to their vendors...

Now the IT market needs a kinder, gentler approach. Despite the critics, I am one of the consistent voices that support CeBIT.

I can't imagine...well, yes I can, but I don't want to imagine a European IT industry where we can't gather once a year, to meet and greet one another from the wide range of cultures and countries.

Hate it I did, but I miss the American Comdex. CES has taken up the slack on the consumer IT side but there's a hole in my heart every November.

Losing CeBIT would be a great loss to us all.

To anyone who came to CeBIT this year, if you could pretend you had never seen any other CeBIT...if you didn't know the Big CeBIT...if this CeBIT was your first... then ask yourself, how would it look?

If this was your first CeBIT and you were seeing it with fresh eyes, you'd say it was pretty impressive.

--You wouldn't look around and say snidely, "Did you see how many Halls were closed?"

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--You wouldn't sit in a restaurant in Hall 16 and comment, "Gee, in the past we couldn't get in here, so traffic is way down."

--You wouldn't bitch about 100,000 less people when you can only handle a certain amount from your stand anyways.

I look at CeBIT like a grossly-overweight man that needed to lose weight. I hated the days when you couldn't get in a restaurant, when crowds blocked hallways and taxi lines took an hour or more.

The new and slimmer version suits us fine, I think. Quality not quantity.

I arrive at last...sweating, out of breath, arms aching, and toes frozen. I push the door open and inside Hall 14 is a beehive of stand construction. One of my clients, pausing from putting up a product display, shouts over to me..."Hey, Bob...you just arriving?"

I smile and nod my head but I don't stop and I don't wave because my arms are cramping with the weight of the bags.

Cold air blows through the halls as lift trucks drive in and out. We are surrounded by the measured pace of the men (and women) with belt holsters for their hammers who criss-cross in all directions as if in a ballet of construction. Tomorrow morning the suits will take over, but tonight the hammer-holsters rule.

The boss from the ICP pavilion in Hall 14 (where my stand is) shouts his greeting and waves me over. We are standing on carpet covered with plastic in the middle of a half-constructed pavilion with furniture stacked in piles, numerous boxes (opened, unopened and half-opened), and plastic wrapping on all the furniture, on everything.

"I want to introduce you to someone," he says. "He could be a client for your company..."

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I drop my bags and reach for a business card... Another CeBIT has started.

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Hall 14, ICP Pavilion during CeBIT 2010