

Let your fingers do the walking, paying and transferring. If you're not already banking online, it's time to start.

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AT the click of a button, you can pay your credit card bills, transfer money to anyone you like and settle utility bills. You could also check your account balance any time of the day, and not have to deal with unfriendly bank clerks and annoying queues. You can even invest online, and buy and trade shares.

The advent of online banking, in under 10 years, has revolutionised the way we live.

"Internet banking, or e-banking, offers customers access to products and services - virtually, safely, quickly and conveniently," says Roy Heong, head of Consumer E-Business at Citibank Bhd.

So do we still need brick and mortar buildings if everything can be done online? What about the relationship between bank and customer? Besides making life easier, doesn't e-banking also make everything automated and therefore, impersonal?

"E-banking services do not de-personalise the relationship between bank and customers; on the contrary, they allow the bank to be highly accessible any time and anywhere for its customers," Heong adds.

"For instance, transaction enquiries, fund transfers and payment of bills do not require face-to-face contact and can be done efficiently and quickly via e-banking. This means banks can deploy their employees more effectively in areas where personal contact is value-added and we can build close personal relationships with our customers."

Danny Ling, 30, prefers to do all his banking online, unless he needs to sign a document or submit a printed form.

"I pay my credit card and utility bills online and it only takes 10 minutes. Imagine if I had to go to drive to a bank, find parking, and wait in line. The choice is obvious," he says.

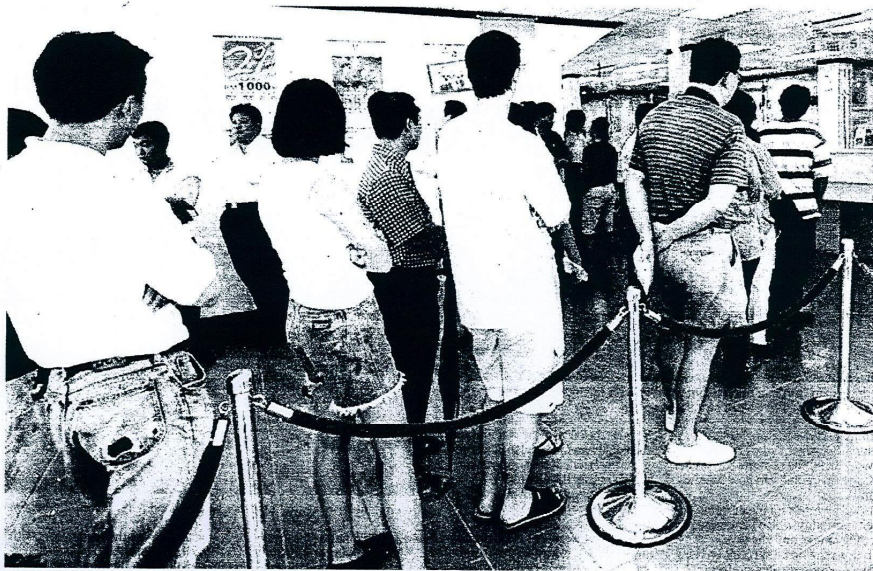
Seema Viswanathan breezes through her bills just as fast. "I can pay four utilities bills and make two giro transfers for credit card payments in 10 minutes. I can also transfer money to other accounts or other banks for loan or credit card payments, and more," she says. The only times she walks into banks is to use their automated teller machines (ATM) to get cash.

However, what Seema, 36, dislikes about e-banking is that payments to certain merchants take several working days to go through. This means her payments are occasionally late. To get around this, she arranges fixed monthly payments from her account, at an earlier date.

Heong says all banks have generally managed to integrate their e-banking services with what they offer at the counter, thus providing a complementary, value-added and almost seamless portfolio of products and services to customers.

On the issue of safety, banks are aware that online frauds and scams do put people off Internet banking and have put various stringent secu-

Click and you're it



With e-banking, customers will no longer have to waste time waiting in queues.

»Internet banking, or e-banking, offers customers access to products and services - virtually, safely, quickly and conveniently«

ROY HEONG



You can even invest online or find new ways to make your money grow.

Heong says e-banking will integrate mobile technology so as to be even more accessible to all consumers.

"We believe that mobile banking will be another area of growth as people are starting to use their mobile phones for bill payments and transactions."

If you're wondering if you should jump on the bandwagon, take a look at Bank Negara's Financial Stability and Payment Systems Report 2008. It shows that the number of mobile banking subscribers rose from 300,000 as at the end of 2007 to 500,000 last year. Transaction value surged from RM21.2m to RM71.5m over the same period.

The report also highlights that mobile payments have expanded by 197.4% and 163.8% in volume and

value, respectively. This was due to increased mobile e-money and mobile debit applications, whereby customers make payments using their mobile phones via a direct debit from their accounts.

Merchants are catching on to the trend, and merchant acceptance grew by 11% to 12,512 merchants as at end 2008.

"We believe mobile payments will grow in the next few years as they are very convenient, with our increasingly busy lifestyles," says Heong. "This way, we can extend our financial services to the unbanked (rural) communities."

Citibank launched its online banking services in 2001. Today, it handles about 13 million transactions a year and serves more than 300,000 online users, he adds.

rity measures in place.

One of these involves educating customers on online banking practices, such as not clicking on e-mail links that take them to interfaces that ask for usernames and passwords, and to always log in at the bank's website. Some banks even issue security devices that generate a random sequence of numbers for log-in purposes.

Daniel Henry, 26, used to do his banking online until he started hearing about scams involving websites and banks. Now, he's wary of transferring money or making payments online and prefers to go to the ATM to do that.

At Citibank, Heong says, they go to the extent of employing "ethical hackers" who continuously test the application of security standards and protect its site against online threats, to give customers t peace of mind.

There is also a hotline for queries on Internet banking, and a website which focuses on best practices and the latest security measures (asia.citibank.com/onlinesecurity).



Seema Viswanathan ... usually needs just 10 minutes for her online transactions.

The bank also offers text messaging (SMS) alerts on demand, to update customers on significant information and transactions.