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Special Report: Technology

How Technology Has Changed the Way We

...Find Love

Online matchmaking can create too-high expectations and mask real-life incompatibilities. It also can work.

By **AMY MERRICK**

Robin Wilson got hitched by a glitch. Five years ago, as a University of Memphis student, Ms. Wilson was surfing Match.com, a popular dating site that posts members' pictures and biographical data. Intending to look for men from New England, she accidentally clicked on England. But

before she could correct her mistake, Shaune Beattie's profile caught her eye. She liked his picture, and his "handle," or screen name, was "womble," a long-snouted, teddy bear-like creature from a British children's TV show. "Usually, nice guys are kind of serious, but he seemed really lighthearted," she says.

They began trading trans-Atlantic e-mails. Several months later, she took a spring-break trip to England. Upon arriving, she spent an hour in the airport bathroom just to gather the courage to meet her long-distance love. "I'm here in this country I've never been to before to see this guy I've never met before," she recalls thinking. "Sane people do not do these things." But soon after their first encounter, Mr. Beattie moved to Atlanta -- and the couple married in 1997. Since then, inspired by Ms. Wilson-Beattie's example, her best friend also married a man she met through Match.com, a subsidiary of **Ticketmaster Online-CitySearch Inc.**

Lonely Hearts' Broadband

In just a few short years as a mass medium, the Internet has helped change mating rituals. Lured by the possibility of pinpointing features of a potential mate, and the safety of chatting online before meeting, singles are turning in droves to dating sites and relationship-oriented chat rooms. People who are too busy to search for a mate in the real world sing the praises of such services -- but some experts fear that picking a lover by an online profile creates unrealistic expectations, and ignores the subtleties of personality and interaction.

"The variables people know about themselves and their desires are just the tip of the iceberg," says Joseph Walther, an associate professor of communication, social psychology and information technology at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy,

N.Y. "The process of discovering people has never been entirely reliant on a checklist."

Still, online dating services have won a lot of converts. In September, for example, Web-tracking service Media Metrix estimated 712,000 unique visitors to Friend Finder Network Inc.'s FriendFinder.com, and 497,000 visitors to Match.com. These represent the total number of users who visited the site at least once in the month. Nielsen/NetRatings, which uses a different sample, reported 422,000 visitors to FriendFinder.com and 307,000 to Match.

As for growth rates, **Lycos** Inc.'s Matchmaker.com says 40,000 new members join each week, while Friend Finder says its annualized growth rate is more than 150%. Match estimates that 520,000 members resigned after finding the relationship they were seeking, based on exit surveys.

And these sites still haven't tapped much of the market. A telephone survey conducted for Friend Finder by OmniTel, a service of Bruskin/Goldring Research, found that while 73% of single adults surf the Internet, only 5% have tried to find an online romance. Also, men are three times more likely than women to have tried to find a romantic interest on the Internet, according to the same survey.

For believers in online dating, real-world searches for a mate are a disaster. People have become too busy to wander around a bar, trying to start a conversation that may go nowhere, high-tech proponents say, and office mates pair up less frequently because of stringent sexual-harassment laws. Instead of donning a leather miniskirt and heading to a bar, a woman can toss on pajamas and sift through e-mails at 11 p.m.

"The busier someone is with a job, the more they turn to the Internet to find someone," says Deborah DeBarr, a 46-year-old author in the Washington, D.C., area who began researching high-tech dating two years ago when she placed an online personal ad that drew 6,500 responses. "People don't like that beginning stage of dating. It's awkward -- you step around on eggshells."

The trends extend beyond the younger generations. Though college students, who spend a lot of time online anyway, often use technology to make contacts, many people in their 40s say they found their second spouse online -- a person who turned out to be far more compatible than a first marriage partner met in a more traditional way.

The reason? Customization. Apart from convenience, perhaps the biggest appeal of online dating services is the ability to narrow down what you're looking for in another person. Want a Catholic, a single mom or a free spirit who happens to be half your age? Check the right boxes, and the experts will conjure a dream partner out of their well-stocked databases.

ZofaKind Online, for example, asks new members to fill out a complicated online form evaluating their traits and interests. Are they "easygoing" or "wild & crazy"? Do their social circles feature "country folks" or "computer nerds"? Dating hopefuls use a point system to rate which categories are most important in a partner. (If

finding someone of Chinese heritage is crucial, for example, add 50 points to that category.) The site then pairs members who have similar priority rankings.

The scientific approach has some merit: If a mate must have a Lutheran upbringing and a love of turtles, it saves time to filter out everyone else. "It's going to be a hell of a lot closer than if you meet someone at a bar, the library or the grocery store," says Cindy Hennessy, president of Match.com, which claims four million registrants since its 1995 debut. The site says it has confirmed 1,100 marriages and 42 babies as a result of its services. Yet this pragmatic strategy also removes the chance for serendipity. Some critics say dating-service questionnaires could reduce the search for love to a headhunting mission for the most qualified candidate.

"There's a lot to be said for surprises and letting them be really delightful," says Mr. Walther of Rensselaer Polytech, who adds that he strongly believes in leaving room for fate in developing relationships.

And technology doesn't just spoil the initial contact, the critics say; it sticks around and keeps causing problems. Because people are hooking up in cyberspace rather than at the laundromat, much about their correspondents remains a mystery. So the inclination among online daters is to find out as much as they can about their match before they actually meet. Those who meet online often correspond for weeks before getting together, and some give out cell numbers rather than more private home lines. Some pagers also substitute for e-mail: **Motorola** Inc.'s Talkabout T900 unit, for example, offers two-way text messaging that is popular with teenagers and college-age buyers.

Some experts say such gadgets only compound problems in the offline romantic world, making people more, not less, isolated. People in their 20s and 30s, especially, already spend so much time on the computer that their in-person social skills have suffered, the pros say.

"I think we need more time with human beings," says Nina Atwood, a "relationship coach" and therapist in Dallas. "My hope is that people will move back more to face-to-face contact."

Brush Up on Shakespeare

Mr. Walther sees another problem with constant e-mail contact: false impressions. Impression management -- the psychological process of choosing which traits to present to others -- occurs constantly, Mr. Walther says. But online, in the absence of other sensory information, the phenomenon accelerates. Words become everything. "If you have any inclination to like somebody, you don't have contradictory evidence that would tarnish that impression," he says.

High-tech daters become so enthralled with their intellectual connections, he says, that they may assume there will be a natural physical attraction. But creating a fantasy partner out of a few carefully chosen lines can set up a big disappointment when the spark fizzles in person.

"Computer and online dating tends to lead to fantasy attachments that don't last very long," says Ms. Atwood, the therapist. "Even though the trend is to use the computer, I still find that most good relationships don't happen over the Internet. Most people meet through their social network or through face-to-face encounters in the real world."

Techno-advocates play down the problems. E-mail, they say, has spurred a return to romanticism. Long after love letters lost their cachet, e-mail gives shy literati their chance to shine.

Moreover, some say, serendipity can be overrated. "What happened in the past is that people didn't think they could really get what they wanted," says Fran Greene, Match.com's vice president of flirting and dating. "By the time they reached a certain age, they would perhaps settle. Many people want it to happen by accident, and they get very frustrated."

What about relationships that turn out to be intellectual fantasies? Ms. Hennessy, president of Match.com, says that if members are willing to be open-minded and aware of the limitations of online romance, they can avoid that pitfall.

"One of the things you frequently hear is that people learn so much more about the other person more quickly" online, she says. "You do need to resist investing too much in that too early."

-- Ms. Merrick is a staff reporter in The Wall Street Journal's Chicago bureau.
Write to Amy Merrick at amy.merrick@wsj.com⁶