

The digital age

by BRIAN LOCKHART

Over the past month, the auto industry in North America had a bit of a rough time.

Several automakers had to shut down some lines and others actually closed the plant on a temporary basis.

There wasn't a slump in sales ? the closures were due to a parts shortage.

When you hear that, you might think they ran out of Johnson rods or maybe a shipment of fuel pumps were lost at sea when a container ship ran aground.

Nope ? the lines were shut down because of one tiny microchip that wasn't available.

When the current pandemic changed peoples lifestyles and forced a lot of folks to stay home, sales of smartphones and video games and similar products went through the roof.

It didn't take Chinese chip manufactures long to switch production to gear their products to that market and away from the auto industry. After all, in the video and smartphone market they were getting orders of one billion, whereas the auto industry required less than 100 million.

Money talks.

It seems unlikely that a single computer chip could stop production in something as important as the auto industry - but it did.

After all, those computer chips are now an integral component in new cars.

You can't sell someone a \$30,000 SUV and explain that the traction control they paid for doesn't work because the computer chip that controls it wasn't available.

It is amazing how much of our modern lives are controlled by digital technology.

It sort of snuck up on us, but once the technology became mainstream, the world changed.

Smartphones aside, digital technology has replaced how things operate on so many levels, you don't even notice it anymore.

If you ever had one of those big, clunky television sets that weighed a ton and had a picture tube the size of Volkswagen Beetle, you probably appreciate that flat screen you now have hanging on the wall in your rec room.

?There is nothing that will ever replace film,? a professor told us during a discussion about cameras when I was in film school.

At the time, 35 mm film ruled the camera world and the idea of something that could come along and replace it seemed unlikely.

It wasn't too long after that the concept of digital cameras started to be known in science magazines.

When the first digital cameras were first produced they were more of a curiosity than anything else.

They lacked the depth, colour, and vibrancy of photos produced on regular film. The images produced had an unflattering flatness to

them.

However, while the executives at Kodak were asleep at the switch and fiddled while the film world began its slow decent into oblivion, other companies realized the camera industry would indeed become part of the digital world - and for good.

Those companies went on to build a better version of the camera then improved on that design. They finally decided to merge the capabilities of a single lens reflex camera with a digital format.

When the first version of a Nikon DSL came on the market, I was on the waiting list to receive one. It was a great camera that made my life a lot easier.

Thanks to the digital world many people can work from home. You can go a year without seeing a co-worker and still get your job done.

I'm not sure how this has affected the greeting card companies, but you are now way more likely to get a holiday or birthday greeting via Facebook than you are through snail mail.

And a hand written letter? That's almost a lost art form.

I'm pretty sure schools have stopped teaching kids how to write ? although I may be wrong. But with most work done on a keyboard now, it's a lot easier and faster to type a letter than it is to pick up a ballpoint pen and write it out long-hand.

Although I think if you are writing a love-letter of sorts, it may have more impact to tell the girl of your dreams how you feel about her on paper rather than a computer screen.

Digital technology has changed our world so much that without it, we would now be in lot of trouble if something suddenly happened to eliminate it from our lives.

The only drawback is a loss of power plunges us from the digital age to the stone age in the blink of an eye.

For now, I'm going out to check the computer chip that controls the Johnson rod in my car and make sure everything looks A-okay.