

Technology & stress: Good tool, bad tool

by Jim Calloway



We resort to technology to make our lives easier, our work more efficient, our practices better. Why then do we seem to suffer from more stress and a compromised quality of life? Why, when we have technology tools that accomplish tasks in a fraction of the time it used to take do we work more and longer hours – not less? And is there anything we can do about it?

Part of the answer, suggests Jim Calloway, director of the Management Assistance Program for the Oklahoma Bar Association, is coming to terms with technology itself. The following is an edited version of an article Mr. Calloway originally wrote for The Oklahoma Bar Journal (Vol. 30, No. 3). The full text is available at www.practicepro.ca/technologystress.pdf.

Calloway's Rules of Technology and Stress

1. THE KEY POINT: USING TECHNOLOGY SPEEDS UP THE PACE OF EVERYTHING.

The purpose of almost all technology is to do things faster, and often better, than we humans can.

In simpler times, getting to work an hour early meant an hour of uninterrupted time to prepare for the day. Interaction with those outside the office was limited because their phones were not yet being answered. Now, through the technological magic of e-mail, faxes and mobile phones, you can get to work early and have a half-dozen negative interactions with others before the day even officially starts. We can, and therefore do, run at a faster pace. And if you let technology set your pace, it will be make you run faster and faster.

To survive in a law practice, you have to learn how to set your own pace.

2. LIVING IN A TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY IS STRESSFUL.

Technology eases our lives in many ways, but it also is demanding and time-consuming. Realizing its benefits generally requires knowledge and understanding.

When you depend on a device to do something for you, can you still do it when the device is inoperable? If there was a power failure in the manual typewriter era, you could light a few candles and keep going. When there's no power, today's law office is shut down. The same is true when a machine is broken or "the network is down." Automated phone systems

may be a money saver for the company you call, but you need time and energy to navigate through the menus. In fact, many of the benefits of e-commerce revolve around forcing the consumer to enter data that previously was entered by clerical staff on the company's payroll.

We live in a society that provides a constant flood of information. From hundreds of cable TV channels to the Internet to the mobile phone, there is more information pushed at you each day than you can possibly retain and manage. How could anyone manage it all? For most of us the term "information management" would be better described as "information triage."

There is little wonder that today many of us feel like we are trying to take a drink of water from an open, spewing fire hydrant as we look for an answer. There's just too much.

3. TECHNOLOGY ALWAYS INVOLVES TRADE-OFFS.

Technology may give us great benefits, but it also can take ... and take ... and take some more.

There is certainly no free lunch where law office technology is concerned. You may implement technology that does a marvelous job for you. But it still has to be purchased and installed. Plus, it's mostly useless without investing in training and maintenance.

One of the biggest stress producers of technology is knowing that you have the tool right at your fingertips that will do the task you need done right now, but not knowing how to make it do so. You likely do not even have all the features of your mobile phone committed

to memory and are a rare person indeed if you have mastered your wordprocessing software. But investing hours in training and learning how to use your technology can be just as frustrating as not knowing how to work the program in the first place – especially when there is “real work” still to be done.

The reality is we pay for the benefits of technology. You can reduce your stress just by understanding and accepting that premise. Celebrate when technology allows you to land a new client from across the country who would have never heard of you in the pre-Internet days. Then when you spend 45 minutes reading online help files, cryptic instruction manuals and third-party books to learn how to do a task in “only” a minute, try to accept that as well. Besides, hopefully next time it will only take you a minute to do the task.

4. DEALING WITH CHANGE GENERATES STRESS, AND TECHNOLOGY WILL ALWAYS BE CHANGING.

Technology expands, improves and changes. Dealing with change is always stressful.

Computers in the law office clearly make certain tasks, such as billing, much easier. But it seems that as soon as you master one part of technology, there is an improvement or an upgrade that requires you to change how you operate. This seemingly constant process of learning, relearning and then learning anew all over again has led many to rebel and refuse to change.

Lewis Carroll described the way many of us feel in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: “You have to run as fast as you can to stay where you are.”

5. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY DISTANCES THE HUMAN ELEMENT IN COMMUNICATIONS.

Certainly you can get a laugh from an e-mail from a friend or be touched by a warm voice mail from your spouse.

But we learned in the early days of e-mail that there was more to interpersonal communications than the words. Without the context of facial expressions, voice tone and other cues, a lot of misunderstandings arose. E-mailers soon adopted emoticons, like little smiley faces, to improve their communications.

As we communicate more and more by e-mail, we should be aware of this fact. If you sit in your office with the door closed and send out directions by e-mail all day, your staff will feel more job stress and will not function well as a team. Good teams are based on relationships and understanding. It is difficult to create or nurture a relationship via e-mail.

6. YOU CAN BE CONNECTED ALL THE TIME, AND YOU CANNOT BE CONNECTED ALL THE TIME.

With relatively inexpensive investments in technology you can literally be available to your clients and to your work projects 24-7. This is not, of itself, bad. Using a laptop or personal digital assistant to make use of otherwise unproductive time, being able to work remotely when you are ill, are a good thing.

But lawyers tend to be highly motivated, highly focused individuals. Fifty- to sixty-hour workweeks are not uncommon. Current technology allows you to work around the clock from wherever



you may be. You can check the office e-mail from home at night after the family goes to bed. You can track down your staff or other lawyers at odd hours with their mobile phone numbers. You can access your office files remotely. You can, quite literally, work all the time.

You can – but you can't. We human beings are not machines. We cannot stay focused on work for too long without a break. When we try to do it, we begin to function erratically. We lose our tempers. We lose our objectivity. We make mistakes. We manifest the results of our stress in many different ways.

So what can we do about this?

You need to set your own pace and recognize that the use of technology tools will pressure you to speed up your pace.

You need to adopt a triage approach to the flood of information you receive every day. You cannot handle it all. You must practise prioritization, which may be the most important job and life skill of the 21st century.

You need to give some thought to the trade-offs and negative consequences of your technology instead of just blindly accepting them.

Do not let technology tools convince you to undertake more than you can handle. You can only safely handle so much work. It is very important to not let your technology's capabilities lure you into agreeing to do more than you can or should do.

You need to give yourself permission and time for fun and recreation. Laying on the sofa watching an old movie you love is not being lazy, it is recharging your batteries.

Good tool, bad tool

Technology gives us a set of tools. These are new and powerful tools. But they are still tools – our tools. And we should control our tools.

We have decisions to make about how to use our technology tools. Using the tool when it helps and not using it when it detracts is the key – and know when to hit the “off” switch.

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