



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## Inspector Gadget

If you have a teenager in your family, or perhaps if you have a particular type of humor, you might have found yourself sitting in a theatre watching a movie called “Inspector Gadget”. In that film a law enforcement officer took on the role of being a human Swiss Army Knife able to morph into whatever particular gadgets were needed to cope with an emergency. It was intended to be humorous but it did raise an interesting issue. That issue is: what new tools of the trade do we need in order to do our jobs?

Most of the people who read this column are in fire prevention bureaus. Therefore, I would like to spend a few minutes talking about what new gadgets might be sitting out there on the shelves that could be used to improve the performance of our fire inspectors. In previous columns including this magazine and others I have written about the fact that giving an individual a toolbox to become more effective in the field is a way of leveraging our staff resources. This article is no exception. Therefore I am not going to belabor some of the stuff I have talked about in the past such as the use of dictation machines. Instead I want to focus on some of the stuff you might be finding between the pages of electronic catalogs.

In the past I have referred to these gadgets as being “time machines”. When I am in reference to time here it is not that we are going to save time but rather that we are going to utilize it more effectively. In reality there is only sixty seconds in every minute and sixty minutes in every hour. You can’t accumulate it and store it up somewhere. Instead you have got a challenge when you are in an intense time focused occupation to use your time the most productively and to be able to bring about a change that impacts the problem that you are tasked with resolving.

To start this article I would like to draw a distinction between field time and station time. The amount of time spent in a fire station, i.e. the fire prevention bureau in the past has often been regarded as being an absolute necessity in order to get the paperwork done. Not uncommonly fire inspectors have been given office hours means that they are supposed to be there for a certain period of time each day to do two things. The first of these is to respond to the documentation responsibilities and the second is to be available to receive incoming phone calls. Both of these concepts have been rendered obsolete by existing technology.

There are four devices that I would like to elaborate on here. The first is one that you may not have even regarded as being a firefighter tool. That is a geographical positioning system device. The next is one in which everybody has to keep track of a lot of time commitment needs is the personal data assistant – or PDA. The third is laptop computers. And the fourth is adequate software to make all of that stuff work.



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At one point in time almost all of those were separate tools. However, with the technology becoming increasingly focused on productivity in many cases you can find combinations of technology that resolve multiple purposes. For example you now have cell phones that are also PDA's. You also have laptop computers that contain self-locating GPS units. I am not going to talk about brands or am I going to talk about specific technologies here because that focuses on the wrong topic. Instead what I am going to talk about is a concept.

That concept is the dynamic field office. Let's take a look at that cell phone for example. I don't know if there is a human being on the face of the earth that hasn't been offered a cell phone. I don't know if there is any single person who hasn't been inundated with cell phone ads. The fact is that they are also a real pain in the neck sometimes. If you have ever had someone's cell phone go off in the midst of a movie and have them answer it, you know that they can be rude and intrusive. But put your fire inspector's hat on and ask what can the cell phone do for you?

Well, let's start with some real basics. You don't have to have your cell phone turned on all the time but you can use voice mail to expedite telephone communications in the field at a much different rate than having to go back to the fire station and coordinate. Moreover, many cell phones today have the ability to take quick snapshots which can be downloaded over the web and provide an instantaneous record of a specific code violation. You don't even have to wear the cell phone on your body as much as you can have it in the vehicle plugged into a power source.

I mentioned about multiple technologies earlier so this might be a chance to do two things. In another article entitled "Car 54 Where Are You" I provided a description of a GPS based cell phone that keeps track of locations throughout an entire working day. Granted, a lot of people don't want anybody knowing where they are or what they are doing. However, a responsible fire inspector that has access to this type of phone can find himself or herself being much more productive when it keeps track of where they were and when they were there during an average workday.

That leads me to the discussion of the GPS receiver. Remember the battle cry of the real estate sales person? Location! Location! Location! More and more fire departments are beginning to recognize that by using GPS information and accurately locating facilities and/or resources on the ground they are gaining greater and greater control over what is going on in their fire protection environment. There is nothing to prohibit a fire department from giving a GPS receiver to a fire inspector who is going and doing such things as looking at fire hydrants – checking addresses of buildings, points of access, etc.

These devices don't exactly require a rocket scientist level of knowledge to utilize. In fact many of them can be set up where you can turn them on and they will actually keep track of where you go throughout and entire day as was mentioned earlier in our cell phone application. The main theme behind GPS is to give the fire inspector an extra tool when it comes to identifying specific locations.



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In my own experience, I have had situations where GPS would have been a lot better to describe a particular location than an address, for example, walking the perimeter of a fire in the wildland. Wildland firefighters are doing that already. Perhaps it is time for the structural fire service to get to understand that by using GPS to look at areas such as areas of impact that you can obtain additional information. It is not a far reach from four GPS coordinates that are linked together to coming up with information about square acreage involved in a wildland fire or perhaps an area covered by a hazardous materials spill.

There are several software products on the market today that will allow you to also use your laptop computer to keep track of your route of travel and/or specific locations of buildings of interest. In my vehicle I have a portable computer with a device that I can set up on my dash that provides minute-by-minute documentation.

Then there is software to save you time and effort also. There are several software products on the market today that allow you to complete forms in the field and then send the information to a server through an Internet server using wireless technology. The time it takes for you to complete an inspection and have a brief coffee break the server has been updated with all the most accurate information and there is a minimum amount of time spent when you return home. Moreover, these technologies automatically print citation notices in the field, which also are being used to generate data for performance reports.

When conducting discussions with individuals I often run into the argument that it costs too much. Well cost and benefit are two different aspects that we need to know more about. If you buy something and do not utilize it there is no benefit. On the other hand if the cost that you devote to something allows you to become more productive and improves the performance of the individual then the question is how beneficial is that change? The kind of technology I am talking about in this article could conceivably add six to eight hours of increased productivity to a fire inspector over a human workweek. Eight hours times fifty is roughly the equivalent to adding ten additional workweeks to the productivity of a fire inspector.

Now, if your department is sensitive to performance measures and is doing a reasonable job at looking at its workload, the addition of tools such as we mentioned in this article every time you add that tool inventory you add approximately twenty-five percent of another fire inspector. Maybe that is not important to you right this moment. But when confronted with increased workload you get two choices.

The first is to go in and do everything you possibly can to beg, borrow or steal to get additional personnel. That is becoming increasingly difficult to accomplish in many environments. It is not that it is



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not appropriate that we continue to try. The real issue is that you need to become more knowledgeable about what options might be open to you. Utilizing the Inspector Gadget approach you might request a capital item and obtains its purchase much faster than you would get the additional personnel resources.

I might be wrong on this interpretation but I believe that this kind of tool and technology is also capable of being reimbursed under development fee schedules.

Finally, I don't want to suggest that we launch our fire inspectors at the beginning of the month and never see them again as human beings until the end of the month. What I am talking about is a balancing between technology and workload that allows us to really address our problems of managing the community's fire problem in the same fashion that the rest of the industrial world was looking at. Cops are way ahead of us on this. Water meter readers are ahead of us on this. Pizza delivery people know more about GPS than many fire departments in this country. You may not have an Inspector Gadget today but a little research on somebody's part could well equip your fire inspector and perhaps your fire investigator with a set of tools worthy of any other professional.

Now if we could just figure out how those folks on Star Trek can beam those people from location to location maybe we will eliminate the need to find a parking spot for the fire inspector.