



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Gadgets, Gizmos and Goodies;
The Electronic Office of the Future

If you don't have anything to do in your job, this column is probably not going to be for you. If you come to work every morning, prop your feet up on the desk, open a newspaper, and read the latest news, you are probably receiving all the information you need. If you have the ability to process everything that goes on in your office without benefit of interaction with anyone outside your office, then move onto another article this month.

On the other hand, if you are suffering from information overload and if you are receiving input from 16 different directions, it is time to take a breather and see what weapons there are in the arsenal against the war on our time.

There are a couple of things we need to assume that might be pertinent to the need of a fire chief today to have a few tools that we did not have a few years ago. The first assumption is that we simply cannot be everywhere all the time and that there are people who wish to contact us who have a similar chaotic schedule - therefore, we often find ourselves playing the game of proverbial telephone tag.

Calling back and forth and missing one another is an extremely expensive behavior. It consumes two things simultaneously. The first is time; the second is the cost of telephone calls, especially exacerbated if we are talking about long distance.

Let's talk about the tools we could have available to us in an electronic office that would enhance our productivity and our performance. The tools I suggest are:

- 1) A state of the art telephone capability
- 2) fax machine
- 3) personal computer
- 4) dictation equipment
- 5) paging equipment

State of the art telephones are more than just a sender and receiver. They possess a whole array of capabilities that are very important to maintain continuity in the communications process; such as the idea of having a call waiting feature on the telephone. This means that when you receive an incoming phone call and you're talking to someone else, at least you know someone is trying to get a hold of you. If you've ever been on the receiving end of a series of busy signals when you really need to get through to someone you know how irritating that can be.



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Having your telephone capability include the ability to know when someone is trying to call you in spite of the fact you are talking to someone else gives you the option. If the person you are talking to is very important and you don't wish to stop talking, you have the choice of ignoring it. If you are expecting an incoming phone call and the person you are chatting with is either social or informal, then you can ask them to wait while you take that most important phone call.

Another feature of the state of the art telephone is the concept of hands-free operation. The ability to conference in a room is not just a luxury. It allows you to operate by using your hands to conduct business at the same time that your mind and your mouth and ears are communicating. This is not a trivial feature. This is especially important if you are trying to respond to someone on the telephone and you must find data in your desk or office to respond to questions.

The hands-free feature allows you to continue with the discussion instead of putting the other party on hold (which happens to be the longest and strongest silence in the world) and I believe it provides a more professional opportunity to continue with dialogue with people you consider to be important.

The third feature is incorporated in some phone systems and must be an add-on in others. I am talking about voice mail. In actuality, some people really reject the use of voice mail outright. They find it irritating and when you're calling long distance and you get a tape recorder, it can give you a sinking sensation; especially if the voice mail message takes about 60 seconds of your precious time.

Voice mail systems are most effective when they are easily turned on and off so that people don't accidentally get caught in them (in the so-called loop), and, in fact, they are not used at all in situations in which you don't want to be receiving a lot of input.

For example, voice mail can be used very discreetly instead of generically. You can have the feature on your phone and simply turn it on when you leave the office and/or building. Voice mail can be utilized to receive incoming phone calls when you are working on a most important deadline project and simply don't want to answer the telephone.

Probably one of the most important protocols that we all need to develop is the telephone protocol that relates to how and when we answer telephones that we share with our personal and professional friends. If we have state of the art telephones with these features, we can often use them to our advantage merely by letting people know what we want them to do. For example, I have often called people back and told them I needed some information but needed to talk to them personally and would they call my office back and leave the answer to my question on my voice mail.



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All too often people fail to realize that voice mail is nothing more than another version of correspondence. You call someone up and ask them for an answer to a question. It is not necessary for you to talk to them if all you want is an answer.

This leads us to probably the most ubiquitous new device in the field of electronics - the fax machine. There are pros and cons about owning a fax machine or having one in your office. I won't debate the negatives because those people who don't want one simply don't understand the primary advantage of the fax machine. It is a time saver. You can actually use it to accomplish two things: You can call someone, tell them you need information, and instruct them to fax it to you directly. You don't even need to talk to them. Second, you can send a fax to someone else and tell them you need to make an "appointment" to talk with them at a specific time so they can make themselves available by the phone instead of wasting time talking to their voice mail.

Both these features can be used by fax machines to enhance your ability to control the communications process. If you are sitting in your office with your fax plugged in just waiting for it to come alive and transmit some mystical message from the outer world, you may find yourself sadly disappointed. People will not "fax you" unless they know you have the machinery and unless you establish communications with other people using the fax, they may fall back upon the tried and true telephone tag to try to work things out with you.

I once engaged in a series of communications in which I called someone and told them something very specific that I needed and left the message on their voice mail. I instructed them to fax it to me as quickly as possible. They, in turn, faxed me on the information along with some annotations at the bottom of the paper advising me of someone else that had information. I took the original correspondence, put it back in the machine, and faxed it to the second party requesting supplemental information and received an answer back in less than 30 minutes.

The next tool is the concept of having a PC on your desk. To a lot of chief officers the idea of having a computer on their desk is anathema. It takes on the connotation of secretarial type functions. That's not what I am suggesting it be used for. Instead, the personal computer on an executive's desk should be their information retrieval tool. Granted, for those of you who are better than average typists, you might want to bang your own letters out but that's not what I'm referring to.

A personal computer is an excellent device to store data base information on telephone numbers, names, addresses, contacts, etc. My personal preference is to use a hypercard stack that contains the names, addresses, and phone numbers of people that are involved in my information exchange network. I will frequently go to the find mode on the computer as I'm conversing with someone on the telephone.



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For example, if someone mentions Chief XYZ, I will type in Chief XYZ's name under the find mode and hit the key. Instantly, his name, address, phone number and other information comes up on the screen. This often gives me an additional clue as to what that information might be useful for. I might be able to give the name and address to the person I am talking to on the phone, or, as soon as I hang up, I can instantly place a call to that individual and get more information for what I am working on.

Database management is somewhat complicated at times and I'm not suggesting that the fire chief get heavily involved in trying to use the computer to operate his/her entire life. However, the PC is useful for creating master calendars and keeping track of events. It allows you, with a few key strokes, to collect information on a day to day basis that can be summarized at the end of the evening to reflect upon your productivity and effectiveness.

Closely aligned with the PC is the concept of handheld executive organizers. Without mentioning any brand names, the type I use is about the size of a handheld calculator and contains almost all the functions I need to keep organized on a day to day basis. For example, it contains a calendar program, a memo writing program, and a to-do list. As of the writing of this article, I have almost 2,000 telephone numbers in that pocket organizer. There are PC interfaces that allow you to download this information directly into the hypercard stack which only means that information you collect in the field is instantly added to your files at home, and vice versa.

Dictation devices are the hardest things in the world to convince fire chiefs that they need to learn to use. For some reason, they are almost intimidated by the idea of talking to equipment instead of a human being. Yet, they are the best time machines you can learn to master. This particular column was a direct result of a telephone conversation I held with someone as well as a book I have been reading on organizing writing skills. Yet, this column itself prepared on a drive between Monterey and Sacramento. In some four hours of driving time I completed 40 letters and prepared two columns for 'Fire Chiefs' Magazine.

The only way to get used to using dictation machines is to pick one up and start talking into it. If need be, you might want to start off with an outline. I frequently make notes to myself and merely tape them to the dashboard of my automobile. Granted, one must be extremely careful to learn to use dictation equipment when you're driving so that you don't become another combat casualty on the highway. The point is, a dictation machine is a communication device. I have often used my dictation machine to give instruction to my secretary when I knew she and I would not have face to face contact. I have taken reports and given an overview of what I wish to have done with them and left the tape with the report.

It is merely a time saving device that allows your voice to communicate to someone who can transcribe, interpret or otherwise follow through when you are not there to do it yourself.



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Our last device is one in which there is a considerable amount of controversy. The idea of carrying a pager around has gone through the various stages of being really unique followed by being somewhat of a status symbol, followed by being a real pain in the neck. If you have to wear a pager 24 hours a day, it is possible your attitude may be, "I don't want to add any more ways of people getting to me." On the other hand, if you are interested in vital communications, you may wish to consider the pager as a tool to keep you in pace with reality. I have often left my office realizing that I would be receiving a very important phone call.

I have given instructions to my staff to put the person on hold and call me on the pager instantaneously. Utilizing either mobile telephone and/or the closest manual telephone, I would have the phone patched directly through to me and the communication link was forged. The thing you must remember about paging systems is that they are not there to serve as an annoyance.

You should limit the number of people who know how to page you and you should limit the circumstances under which they are allowed to page you. I have told my staff that they are not to page me for routine details that require only a yes or no answer. I make it my personal practice to advise my secretarial staff when I am actually wearing the pager and when I am not.

Well, where are all these electronic gizmos, gadgetry and goodies going to take us? Is the fire chief of the future going to be a bionic/cyborg of electronic communications or is the fire chief going to be an individual who is in control of his own destiny?

As I've described these electronic features, I was reminded that each of them has a cost factor and that not everyone can afford all of them simultaneously. I come from the school of thought that the use of these tools is not intended to overwhelm me with more input I can handle, but to give me tools so I can control the communications process on my own terms. Instead of being overwhelmed by this, I often feel greatly relieved and feel like I have more spare time to choose alternatives instead of spending all my time trying to fill in the blanks because of missed communications.

You pick and choose. As mentioned before, if you are sitting behind your desk with your feet propped up reading this article, you probably had a smile on your face the whole time and may have uttered under your breath a couple of times, "Not on your life." If you are a highly involved individual who is making a lot of things happen in your organization, you may have thought, "Yeah, there are a couple of times when that sure could have helped me out." It is the latter condition that I believe is important for the fire chief. We are at war with a host of adversaries, including fire, misuse of our time, and the stresses and strains of keeping the fire service moving forward.



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Not unlike Captain Kirk standing on the bridge of the Enterprise, we need to be able to communicate with the greatest of ease and the highest level of confidence. The electronic office is not a luxury; it is an arsenal.