Ten Tips for Using Technology Efficiently Without Letting It Run Your Life

by Margaret Spencer Dixon, Esq.

The appropriate use of technology has the potential to significantly enhance our productivity and save time and energy. The inappropriate use of technology, however, has the potential to significantly diminish productivity, engender frustration, and squander precious time and energy.

Three major challenges arise in the course of determining the appropriate use of a particular technology:

● First, optimal technology use is highly personal; a computer program or electronic gadget may appear logical and intuitive to one person but oddly designed and cumbersome to another.

● Second, we must usually use the technology for a while before having enough information to decide whether a system is right for us.

● Third, in order to get the most benefit from technology, we must use it judiciously.

Here are ten points to consider in choosing the technology that will be most helpful to you, and using it in the most productive manner:

1. **Make technology decisions in light of your personal needs and preferences.** No one should feel obligated to keep up with others technologically if their current system satisfies their needs. Judge a system by its results, not the level of technology used to achieve those results. For example, I know a well-organized partner at a Silicon Valley law firm who manages his complex legal practice using little more than a calendar and a dime-store notebook. I also know many less-organized individuals who find little benefit in even the most up-to-date, multi-function information management programs.

2. **Before adopting a new technology, carefully consider the likely time and energy costs** of learning it and integrating it into your overall system. All new technology requires some time investment up-front. Consider the slope of this learning curve and whether the likely improvements to the bottom line will justify this start-up time. Take the time to research which programs and systems are both easy to learn and designed with a robust tolerance for human error.

3. **When adopting a new technology, allow sufficient time with it – at least several weeks – before you decide whether it is right for you.** Expect to make mistakes when you learn a new program, and view the trial-and-error learning process as the norm, not as evidence of poor technological skills. Re-scan the user's guide after using the program or gadget for a while; what made little sense at first will be much clearer once you have a framework of knowledge to work within.

4. **Multitask with caution.** Doing more than one thing at a time is not necessarily good time management. "Humans subjected to excessive laboratory-induced multitasking show increased tension, diminished perceived control, and even experience physical discomfort."[1] Assess whether the benefits of compressing activities justifies the increased stress.

5. **Set your own boundaries.** Consciously choose when and how you are willing to be available to others. Use technology to enforce those limits: let your answering machine or voicemail screen your calls during pre-determined periods; turn off your e-mail prompt and check for new messages every hour or so, rather than allowing new

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[1] Michelle M. Weil and Larry D. Rosen, *Technostress: Coping with Technology @ Work @ Home@ Play* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997) at 109.

e-mail to interrupt or distract you whenever it arrives.

6. **Set your own pace.** Just because you are able to respond to an e-mail instantaneously does not mean you always should. Some responses require time to formulate – to research, discuss with others, or think through your answer. You might want to let the sender know that you received her message, and that you are working on an answer which you expect to transmit to her within, say, 24 hours. Educate your clients and correspondents regarding a reasonable turnaround time.

7. **Apply the basic principles of paper management to all incoming pieces of information** regardless of their source**. For example, whenever you check your e-mail, voicemail, incoming pages, etc., deal with the item as few times as possible. Complete minor tasks immediately without even transferring them to a to-do list, or do as much as you can on the task upon first receiving it (forward a message, fill out a form, etc.) If you cannot complete an item the first time you hear, read, or touch it, add the task to your master to-do list so can complete it at a more appropriate time.

8. **Consolidate your work by merging the output of different forms of technology.** For example, instead of using your e-mail in-box, saved voicemail messages, and the stack of faxes as *de facto* separate to-do lists based on the method by which the task was first communicated to you, keep one comprehensive, backed-up master to-do list on a PIM (personal information manager) such as Microsoft Outlook, or even on a simple word-processing program such as Microsoft Word. Other systems include transcribing voicemail upon first listening to it; printing out substantive e-mails to put in paper files; or scanning paper documents into a word-processing program for inclusion in electronic files.

9. **Don't reinvent the wheel when it comes to filing.** The names and organization of your electronic files and physical files should parallel one another as closely as possible.

10. **Decide when enough technology is enough.** Occasionally doing things the old-fashioned way – such as writing a thank-you note by hand – is a pleasurable change in a high-tech world.

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