

LAST WORD

ANDY BLUMENTHAL

A Vision of User-Centric Communication Design

As technology has advanced in leaps and bounds over the last 30 years, so has the number of information devices—from phones to faxes, pagers to PDAs, desktops to Netbooks—and it goes on and on.

Some devices, despite having outlived their useful lives, have been slow to disappear from the scene completely. For example, fax machines are still in our offices and homes, although now often combined with other devices such as the “all-in-one” copier, printer, scanner, and fax. However, why with the ability to scan and e-mail with attachments, do we even need to fax at all anymore?

Similarly, at one time, pagers were all the rave to reach someone 911. Then cell phones and PDAs took over the scene. Nevertheless, paging never fully went away; instead, it was replaced by “press 1 to send this person a page.” However, why do we need to page them at all anymore, if we can just leave them a voice mail or instant message?

It seems as if legacy technology often just doesn’t want to die, and instead of sun-setting it, we just keep packaging it into the next device, like the phone that comes with e-mail, instant messaging, texting, and more. How many ways do we need to say hello, how are you, and what time will you be home for dinner?

When is technology enough and when is it too much?

Of course, we want and love choice—heck, we’re consumers to the core. Technology choice is like having the perfect outfit for every occasion; we like to have the “right” technology to reach out to others in a myriad of different ways for every occasion. Should I send you an e-mail on Facebook or should I “poke” you or perhaps we should just chat? Or maybe I should just send you a Tweet or a “direct message” on Twitter? No, better yet, why don’t I send you a message on LinkedIn? Anyway, I could go on for about another three paragraphs at least on how I should/could contact you. Maybe I’ll hit you up on all of them at the same time and drive you a little nuts, or maybe I’ll vary the communications to appear oh so technically versatile and fashionable.

Yes, technology choice is a wonderful thing. But it comes at a price. First, all the communication mediums

start to become costly after a while. I can tell you from my cell phone bill that the cost of all these options—e-mail, texting, Internet, and so on—definitely starts to add up. And don’t forget all the devices that we have to schlep around on our belts (I have one cell phone on each side—it’s so cool, like a gunslinger from the Wild West), pockets, and bags—where did I leave that device? Let’s not forget the energy consumption and eco-unfriendliness of all these gadgets and all the messy wires.

Additionally, from a time-is-precious perspective, consider the time sinkhole we have dug for ourselves by trying to maintain a presence on all of these devices and social networking sites. How many hours have we spent trying to keep up and check them all (I’m not sure I can fully remember all my e-mail accounts anymore)? And if you don’t have single sign-on, then all the more hassle—by the way, where did I hide my list of passwords?

Next out of the gate is unified communications. Let’s interoperate all those voice mail accounts, e-mail accounts, IM, presence, and social media communications. Not only will your phone numbers ring to one master, but also your phone will transcribe your voice mails—i.e., you can read your voice mail. Conversely, you can listen to your e-mail with text-to-speech capability. We can run voice-over-IP to cut the traditional phone bill and speed up communications, and we can share nonreal-time communications such as e-mail and voice mail with real-time communication systems like our phone.

So, we continue to integrate different communication mediums, but still are not coalescing around a basic device. I believe the “communicator” on *Star-Trek* was a single device to get to someone on the *Enterprise* or on the planet surface with just the tap of a finger. Perhaps, our reality will some day be simpler and more efficient, too. When we tire of playing with our oodles of technology “toys” and signing up for myriad user accounts, we will choose eloquence and simplicity over disjointed—or even unified—communications.

As the founder of User-centric Enterprise Architecture, my vision is to have one communicator (“1C”)

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device, period. 1C is an intelligent device. “Contact John,” okay—no phone number to dial and no e-mail to address. 1C knows who John is, how to reach him, the best way to contact him, and if he is available (“present”) at the moment or not. 1C can take a message, leave a message, or communicate in any way (voice, text, video, virtual) that an individual prefers and that is appropriate for each portion of a particular communication to ensure that the communication intended is the communication received. 1C is not limited to a one-on-one communications, but is open to conferencing—as needed. Mention the need for Cindy to be in on the communication and instantaneously, Cindy is on and then off again. 1C is ubiquitous in time and space—I can send you a communication to arrive now or next week, when you’re here or there, when you’re in country or out, in a car, on a flight, on a ship, or underwater—it doesn’t matter. Like telepathy, the communication reaches you effortlessly. And, of course, 1C translates languages, dialects, acronyms, or concepts, as needed—truly it’s a “universal communicator.”

The closest we’ve come so far is probably the Apple iPhone, but with some 50,000 apps and counting, it is again too focused on the application or technology to be used, rather than on the user and the need.

In the end, it’s not how many devices or how many accounts or how many mediums we have to communicate with, but it is the communication itself that must be the focus. The 1C of the future is an enabler for the communication—anytime, anywhere, the right information to the right people. The how shouldn’t be a concern for the user, only the what. **A&G**

ANDY BLUMENTHAL is the chief technology officer of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. These are Blumenthal’s personal views and do not represent those of his agency.



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