

Digital Distractions

An interesting article, "[10 IT Skills that Today's High School Kids Have - Do You?](#)" by Randy Muller offers some of the technologies and tools high schoolers are comfortable with. Some of these seem typical, like blogging, Facebook, Linux, gaming, and texting, but others like tech support, programming and hardware would seem to require more sophistication than what we normally ascribe to our kids' skill set. I think the article hits the nail on the head in its conclusion"

What is surprising here is not that High School students are IT savvy, but to what extent and breadth their knowledge extends. It is remarkable seeing how quickly a teenager can figure out the inner workings of a smartphone while the adult fumbles learning just how to turn the phone on in the first place.

I think the reason high school students can "figure out the inner workings of a smartphone while the adult fumbles" is because they are not hindered by the context of the device, in this case a phone. One who grew up with a phone, mounted on the wall in the kitchen, is hindered by the context — the purpose for which the device was introduced — of that object. That kitchen phone could not take pictures, send messages in multiple formats (I guess I could use the touch-tone to send Morse code), reference other devices (having Dad get on the other line when I called home from college was about it), so why would the "phone" in my hand do these things? Because I lack any expectations for this functionality, finding it in context is challenging.

I often give, as an example of this, a conversation I had with my mother, who worked in retail throughout her career. In this discussion, I put together a scenario where my mom overhears a conversation where a shopper is talking socially with her friend, while interjecting that she cannot find something she saw in an add that was on sale: "Oh, yes our vacation was great," says the shopper, "it's so nice to have all of the family together and forget about work for a while. Now where are those shirts that I saw on sale?"

Upon overhearing the question about the sale item, you look up to see, two shoppers walking down the aisle chatting as they search for search. I asked my mother, would you walk up and ask if the shoppers needed some assistance (interrupting their conversation)? My mother said, of course.

I then asked my mom, what about if, when you looked up, you saw one shopper talking on his/her cell phone. Would you walk up and ask if he/she needed help (again interrupting the conversation)? My mom said, no "they are on the phone."

This is remarkable to me, and I think, highlights how my mom carries with her the context of that kitchen phone. First, in my mom's perception, the phone is a limited resource. That is, the phone (even if "cordless") is in a fixed location requiring both parties to "get to the phone" at the same time. How often throughout the day can we synchronize our busy lives to be at the phone (that's why answering machines became so popular, BTW, why do we still need those??) I can very well imagine my mom, not wanting to interrupt because, well they finally "got a hold of each other" and they have "better things to do rather than sit by the phone all day waiting for a call."

Second, a call — especially long distance — is expensive. When I made that call home from college my mom would always remind my dad that "Patrick's calling long-distance." Obviously we needed to keep the call short and conversations direct or face a high monthly phone bill. In addition to concerns about cost, when cell phones came out they were very expensive to buy and use. It was OK for my wife to have one (she is a critical care physician), but not for regular people — "oh, who needs to call you in an emergency?" my mom would ask. Again, I see the rationale for current perceptions on cell phone use tied to a legacy context: associating the cell phone (for emergency communication) with pagers (remember those) or radios (walkie-talkies, not AM/FM radios — another legacy context here too). If she didn't need a walkie-talkie, why would my mom need a cell phone? Obviously, the shopper is on an emergency call, if he/she is using a cell phone.

However neither of these issues are relevant anymore. Carrying a phone with you all of the time, means you (and everyone) is always "sitting next to the phone all day," for good or bad. Indeed, having my phone with me means I have all of my contacts with me all the time: I'm essentially walking down the aisle of the store with all of my friends next to me. It is no more a barrier to contact someone through the phone than it is to look over and start talking to them in the aisle of a store. Everyone I know is with me all of the time. As far as cost, well I do not know of anyone who pays for long distance — either at home or through their cell provider (anytime/anywhere minutes). And even if you have cost considerations, there are plenty of telephony options available.

However, I should not simply pick on my mom, I've seen plenty of other examples where legacy services and systems contextualize current technologies and their application (administration):

- Faculty on campuses-wide wireless and with laptop initiatives who do not want students using their computers in the class because of the distractions.
- Campuses who have spent considerably on emergency notification systems that send out alerts via cell, SMS, IM, and email, but want students to turn off their smart phones while in class.
- Campuses writing policies for every new technologies, first laptops, then smart phones and now tablets (well iPads).

Meanwhile the Today show is warning parents of "digital distractions," caused by multi-media, gaming and social networking: "Kids can become addicted to these things, kids can get into trouble, kids can be made very anxious." Smartphones and the Internet, "changes the way they kids interact with people," continues one of the Today Show's guests. I agree with this last line, these tools do change the way people interact. But like the examples above, we cannot apply our previous use (and understanding) of legacy technologies to today's lifestyle. I really see no difference in watching a sports show (GO BRUINS!) on t.v. with my friends on the couch, and watching the same game while IMing/texting/tweeting with those same friends scattered across the U.S. In fact, I'll go one better, while at game six of the Stanley Cup Playoffs at the Garden (jealous?) I was texting and IMing with friends. I was gloating that I was there and they were not; I was sending pictures of Roberto Luongo on the bench after he was pulled, and; I was debating the plays and penalties. While I can clearly hear my mother bemoaning me should she have seen me on t.v. during the game, "Oh look at Patrick on his phone during the game! Why would he buy those tickets if his just going to stare at that stupid phone and miss the game!" However I would argue, all of this added to my enjoyment of the game. My phone, twitter, texts, IM's and photos did not detract from the game, they enhanced the game. Through social media and the tools that enable it, I was able to attend the game with at least 20 of my friends, and I would even say their experience with the game was enhanced as well.

