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*Running full speed
to stay in the same place*

Feeling Like Roadkill on the Information Superhighway

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By Eric Paulsen, contributing writer

I could feel the muscles in my neck tense up and the warmth of blood rushing into my head.

"Please press 6 if you'd like to access our easy-to-use automated fax back system."

What was 1 again? Was that the selection for checking the balance of the account, or was that number 2? No, that was a litany of other 1-800 telephone numbers that don't pertain to the mortgage company's mortgage business, but instead to some obscure peripheral businesses. Or was that 4?

"Please press 7 if you have an interest in our tax-deferred, chocolate-frosted megabuck cake selection menu or an equity loan for our stress reduction video training courses."

Well, I guess it was 7, huh? The mounting frustration remains: HOW DO I TALK TO A #%@*?&# PERSON!!!! YOU sent me the late-payment notice, while my checkbook and my statement confirm you have the money in your high-tech virtual little hands! I start jamming the "0" button repeatedly and frantically, since that often provides a back door into the flesh'n'blood world of real people you can talk to and whine at.

"I'm sorry. You have made an incorrect selection. Please stay on the line for the next available service representative." The door slams.

Twenty minutes later, the same perky voice chimes in (for the 30th time), "Your call is very important to us. Please stay on the line for the next available customer service representative." I'm actually feeling hatred for that voice and, unfortunately, for the company that is putting me through this technostress ordeal. I'm also sick of perky.

While modern technology certainly has helped us in many ways to cope with our modern world, it has also provided a heapin' helpin' of stress. We are all experiencing a dramatic onslaught of information and technology. What version of Netscape do you have? Do you have all the up-to-date plug-ins like [Java](#), [RealPlayer](#), [Shockwave](#), and Flash? Are you concerned about the [Y2K](#) problem? Do you know what version of Word you have? How about the person you're e-mailing that document to: is their version of Word compatible with yours? Do you know what to do when you see "The server does not have a DNS entry" or "Cannot find MSVCRT20.DLL" messages on your computer screen? Do you know whether to select ISDN, T-1, T-3, ASDL, 28.8, 33.6, or V.90 when you're setting up your computer for streaming media over the Internet?

Is your VCR still blinking 12:00?

It can be frustrating and exasperating. But beneath all that frustration is the burning realization that maybe technology and information are moving faster than we are. I get a mailbox full of free professional periodicals. On top of that, I caved in to Ed McMahon's hype telling me in a "personal letter" that I can win a kazillion dollars AND get discounted magazine subscriptions, so I tore out the little stamps for *PC Magazine* and *MacWorld*, licked them, pasted them on the form, and am still waiting for the check to arrive. I get about 30+ e-mails a day at Boeing, another 20 or so at home. I have well over 100 URL bookmarks.

Oh, yeah, and I have this job that I'm supposed to spend some time on. With the pressure already in the red zone for Boeing people who are tasked with doing more with less and doing it more effectively, faster, and more efficiently, and trying to increase profitability, quality, and customer satisfaction, who has time or patience to download new software? Who has time or patience to keep up with the

latest technological developments?

Except that the media keeps drilling into our heads that knowing the latest technology and what it can do is essential for job security and company survival.

Does your head hurt yet? Have you [run out of nerve cells to store all the information you should know](#)? Does the digital world hold the optimistic promise pundits like [Nicholas Negroponte](#), founder and director of [Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab](#) and one of the founders and a [columnist](#) for [Wired Magazine](#), proclaim in their columns and books?

The tail that wags the dog

"Modern technology was designed to empower us and set us free. So why do we often feel more like its slaves than its masters?" offers [Dr. Michelle Weil](#), a clinical psychologist and co-author of the book [TechnoStress: Coping with Technology @ Work @ Home @ Play](#).

Consider what happened when a satellite got disoriented and created headlines because [people's pagers weren't working](#).

On a more local level, consider these stories.

Recently, we were putting together a "Getting Started" web guide brochure. While we actively promote [Netscape Communicator 4.05](#) as the default browser, many of you are still surfing with Netscape Navigator 3.x or Internet Explorer. We wrote the brochure for 4.05, but enough people thought we should include instructions on using 3 that we felt compelled to include it. It makes for a more cluttered guide, but a more comprehensive one as well.

On another occasion, our esteemed editor fielded a conference call from some managers asking how to select one name from a list of names on a web page. "Just click on the name," she replied. "If text is underlined and a different color from the rest of the text, it's a hot link and clicking it will take you where you need to go."

The response? "How were we supposed to know that!" Indeed, how would they? Where's the class, the memo, the [directions](#) for doing what is second nature to some of us?

Another story dates back a few years. A senior executive was being asked to review a CBT (computer based training) program. The project lead explained how the touch screen worked, stating that users could use either the touch screen or the mouse. The executive nervously and tentatively picked up the mouse and placed it on the screen.

Just look at some of the studies and polls that have been done on the topic of technostress and technophobia (and cyberphobia and computerphobia):

Hello, and welcome to Doctor Froid's analysis and therapy services. So we may better serve you, please select from the following options:

- If you're obsessive-compulsive, please press 1 repeatedly.
- If you're co-dependent, please ask someone to press 2.
- If you're a multiple personality, press 3, 6, 5, and 4.
- If you have an inferiority complex, press 0. NOW!
- If you're paranoid, don't press anything; we know who you are, and what you want. So just sit there while we decide what to do about you.
- If you're schizophrenic, the little voice inside your head will tell you what number to push.
- If you're depressed, it doesn't really matter what number you press. Nobody will answer.
- If you have attention deficit disorder, press
- If you suffer from post-traumatic stress, any number you press will be wrong.
- If you're narcissistic, press the star key.
- If you have an impulse control disorder, throw the handset against the wall. Hard.
- If you struggle with ambivalence, maybe you should press 5, or maybe 4, or maybe you shouldn't have called at all.

- Dr. Mark Brosnan, cognitive psychology lecturer from Greenwich University and author of *Technophobia: The*

Psychological Impact of Information Technology, estimates 25% to 33% of us are computerphobic, with 5% suffering what he calls "excessive phobic symptoms." He contends that computerphobia can have an enormous negative impact on job satisfaction.

- An MCI-sponsored Gallup poll found that 49% of those surveyed admit they are "technophobic" or resistant to new technology.
- A study presented at the Fifth International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction revealed that computer problems are a leading contributor to employee stress.
- In a Reuters business information survey of managers in five countries done in 1996, two thirds reported that information overload led to increased tension with colleagues and diminished job satisfaction. One third of the managers cited information overload as the cause of their own ill health.
- The annual price tag of stress-related ailments for U.S. corporations is estimated at \$300 billion and rising. Technostress is the culprit here.
- And, of course, we can't forget the Carnegie Mellon study that revealed how using the Internet causes depression (for more information, there's the [long version](#) and the [short version](#)).

Larry Rosen, a psychology professor at California State University-Dominguez Hills, and his partner, Dr. Michelle Weil, as mentioned earlier a clinical psychologist, are both experts on technophobia. Compiling all the information they gleaned from some 30 research studies with approximately 12,000 participants, they wrote a book called [*TechnoStress: Coping with Technology @ Work @ Home @ Play*](#). They found that about 85% of us are either hesitant or downright defiant about using technology. The pressure to be computer literate is enormous. They point out that computers today are so widespread within our companies and our homes that you'd think we're all experiencing one big geek-fest. But for every person surfing and computing gleefully on his or her PC, there seems to be another person cowering under his or her desk. While enthusiasts think PCs are liberating, many people find them oppressive.

Rosen and Weil have concluded that people fall into three basic categories of technology comfort:

- The "eager adopters," who make up 10 to 15 percent of us, are "so excited about technology that they just jump up and down," Rosen says. "They want it and they love it and they embrace it." Take a look at our Learn@Boeing web team, and you see jumping beans (with one or two a little more reluctant than the rest).
- The "resistors," who account for 30 to 40 percent of us, are the

people on the other side of the technological fence, Rosen says, "the ones who flat out say no. They don't enjoy technology and they find it intimidating and fear-provoking." I'm guessing there are still a few managers and executives out there who rely on administrative assistants to manage their e-mail and voice mail and to access information on the Intranet.

- The "hesitant-prove it" make up about 50% to 60% of the population. "They're generally the people who are not jumping up and down about technology until you show them and prove to them what technology can 'do' for them, their life, and their career."

Of course, there are other contributing factors that add to the stress. Take, for example, the language of technology, the "[techno-jargon](#)." If you don't know what an "alpha geek" or "prairie dogging" is, or how to take someone saying you're "404," you're out of it, dude! But, as always, if you want to bone up on the jargon, there's a book: [Jargon Watch](#).

With every generation, technology finds a new voice and expression, a new vernacular. Those pesky kids who use a computer like it was a natural appendage and are now the coders and artists for web sites have developed their own versions of "groovy," "rad," and "tubular." English playwright and social commentator George Bernard Shaw said that all professions are conspiracies against the common folk, that "professionals" protect their special status by creating vocabularies that are incomprehensible to the general public. It's both the language and the natural acceptance and proficiency in using computers for the under-30 crowd that probably add to our frustration. There are plenty of real (non-youth-indigenous, non-professionally-protective) new technology terms to know and understand.

Another sore spot is the "embarrassment factor." Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Fear always springs from ignorance." In our zeal to avoid being (or appearing) ignorant, we confront the deluge of information and technology bravely, yet perhaps it simply overwhelms us. It's like volunteering to drive the rental car on a business trip with a bunch of colleagues, then discovering it's a manual transmission, which you don't know how to use.

According to Rosen and Weil, many technophobes "outwardly look quite calm, but inside their head, they're

saying things to themselves that are quite negative and damaging. They will say things to themselves like 'I feel stupid,' or 'I feel ignorant,' or 'Everyone will see how stupid I am.' They're bombarding themselves with negative messages, and part of the problem is that if you're bombarding yourself with negative messages, then you will not succeed. It becomes a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy."

So, with all this data saying we're in trouble as a company that might be 85% computerphobic, what do we do?

Break the power looms

Back in the early 1800s, a group of British weavers whose jobs were being displaced by power looms protested by embarking on a campaign of breaking machinery. Dubbed [Luddites](#), their message was, "Modern technology is bad! Break it!"

Modern or "[Neo-Luddites](#)" abound. They distrust or fear the inevitable changes brought about by new technology. Ironically, there is a plethora of web sites devoted to Ludditism, particularly those of the more prominent spokespeople of the movement like [Kirkpatrick Sale](#) and [Neil Postman](#). It gets a little weird when Sale offers his [endorsement](#) to Ted Kaczynski's "[Unabomber Manifesto](#)" (but not, admittedly, to his tactics).

On the more lighthearted side of the Luddite links is [luddites.com](#). It brazenly (and sarcastically) announces, "Do you loathe computers? Does advanced industrial society really annoy you? Feeling like roadkill on the infobahn? Looking for a bike lane on the information superhighway? Tune in, turn off, and click here." The site "...allows you to discuss strategies for undermining the growing cybourgeoisie and explore Luddite-related links on the hated Internet." [Another site](#) takes a testosterone slant on it, proclaiming that "real men don't download." After reading through pages of erudite commentary proclaiming the evils of technology, this levity is a relief.

Although [bashing computers](#) is not a good solution, perhaps daydreaming about it as you wait for a file to download might be a good stress-reducer.

Take two floppies and call me in the morning

Thankfully, there are as many sources of information on how to cope with this technostress as there are people caving in to the fear and packing up for Pennsylvania or becoming a card-carrying Luddite.

One solution I found on the Internet is a foam brick that you can use to throw at your computer (or pager, or cell phone, or...) when you get frustrated. Or maybe a Nerf bat. Indulge your frustration in a nondestructive way!

Of course, another idea is to learn the technology. Nicholas Negroponte's book [Being Digital](#) is a good start. In the [epilog](#), he waxes optimistically poetic about the wonderful future technology will offer us. Or check out [computer classes here at Boeing](#) or at community colleges. There are plenty of [Boeing organizations](#) that can help you learn the ropes of modern technology.

If you'd rather learn to cope than learn the technology, look at the book that was mentioned earlier, [TechnoStress: Coping with Technology @ Work @ Home @ Play.](#)"

My favorite method? Learn to laugh at it. The [Electronic Frontier Foundation](#) has a [humor site](#). For the literati in the audience, there is a page of [geek haiku](#) to entertain you. The most popular respite for the techno-weary and bureaucratically drained is, of course, the [Dilbert Zone](#).

Ultimately, though, there's no getting around it. Technology is like a tsunami bearing down on us, and it's pretty much get in the boat or drown. Knowing what the new technologies offer and how they can help us learn more and work better is essential. Alternative medicine practitioner [Dr. Andrew Weil](#), in his book [8 Weeks to Optimum Health](#), suggests spending periods of time not watching or reading any news. Yeah, right, maybe on weekends. Try having a productive week without voice mail, without e-mail, without surfing the web for information or training or learning, without pagers or cell phones, without fax machines, without computers! Remember typewriters? Snail-mail? Not having enough quarters for the telephone booth? Yeah, sometimes technology can be overwhelming, but the silence would be deafening. Now we can have [video](#)

[delivered to our desktop computer](#), we can present [training and information resources](#) on the web, we can beam video of live events to your computer or to meeting rooms all around the world. Pretty cool! And, one of the things that drives this technology at Boeing is how much it [helps the bottom line](#). Just looking at the [activity of the Learn@Boeing site](#) makes it apparent how this resource is being accepted and used more and more.

It boils down to this: Without becoming familiar with technology and what it can do, then learning how to use it, your next voice mail message might be, "I'm sorry, you have not learned the appropriate technologies to make you a valuable asset to your company. Your career has expired." In a perky voice, of course.

My own recipe for defusing technostress is seeing Spencer, one of my two cats, sleeping on top of my computer monitor at home, his paws draped over the front edge, barely intruding on the screen. He

occasionally comes to, opens his eyes, and watches me work for a while. I'll usually take a few minutes to scratch him. Sometimes, he'll roll over so I'll scratch his belly, and he ends up comedically falling off the monitor (usually onto his sister, Katie, who is peacefully resting on the laser printer, awaiting another print job so she can attack the dreaded Paper Monster). Other times, Spence simply closes his eyes and drifts off. The perfect [Zen koan](#). My other recipe is just taking the time to learn as much as I can about new technology and the benefits it will bestow. As Steve Mercer, vice president of Learn@Boeing, says, "[Learn or die](#)."

Of course, as [Dennis Miller](#) says as he signs off his HBO show, "That's just my opinion. I could be wrong." @

Quick Poll

Have you ever experienced feelings of technostress?

[YES](#) [NO](#)

[[See Results](#)]