

Chance (Fall 1994)

Is Anyone Out There Talking?

Nowadays, thanks to the miracles of modern technology, you can spend a whole day communicating with countless people without ever having to talk to any of them. In the old days, you picked up the phone and talked with a real person. Now you communicate by fax, voice mail, and the internet. And it's not just in the office; it's everywhere. Want a pizza delivered? Send a fax to your neighborhood "Pizzas 'R' Us." Want to reserve a hot new video? Send e-mail to video@compurent.com. Want to stop the paper while on vacation? Leave a voice mail message, enter your address from a touch tone phone, and your request will automatically be shunted to your local delivery boy's bicycle phone.

Communicating in this way has led to a whole different class of problems. Punch the wrong key on your e-mail system and your sarcastic rendition of your boss's quality improvement plan is sent at lightning speed to every employee in the organization. Once, my fax to order tickets from the National Theatre was sent instead to O'Brien's Funeral Home. They couldn't understand my complaint about having only standing room available last time, nor my request for a box for two. In another electronic mixup, I called and left a message on the home shopping network voice mail to subscribe to a set of CD's of "The World's Greatest Pianists." My request was accidentally shunted to a distributor of X-rated videos. My wife still can't believe what they send us each month--even after a three-year subscription.

What I can't understand is: if nobody is talking to anybody on the phone, why are there so many phones? There are phones for trains, planes, and automobiles. In fact, I tried once to have a car phone installed. The phone company told me to go out to my car the next day and wait--they would be there between 8:30 and 5:00. So, instead, I considered one of those portable cellular phones, but I was concerned about the rumors that the phones might cause cancer. An epidemiologist, however, told me that portable phones have not been shown to cause brain cancer, unless you use them to call the Department of Motor Vehicles. I would have bought the phone, which only weighed 6.3 ounces. But it required carrying the battery pack, transformer, charger, car cigarette lighter adapter, and fax modem around in a backpack.

Clearly, people may have phones everywhere, but that doesn't mean that they are talking to anyone on them. There are fax machines, modems, and answering machines even for car phones. When a friend told me that she had a telephone answering machine installed in her car, I didn't believe her until, one day, I called her car phone and got the recorded message: "I'm sorry we can't take your call right now, because we're home. But, if you'll leave a message, we'll call you just as soon as we go out."

The latest, of course, is voice mail. The federal government has bought into it in a big way. Now, government employees don't even have to answer the phone. That can be an advantage. Instead of being sent on a wild goose chase for information by one government official telling you to call another, you can be sent on the same wild goose chase *automatically* by one office

voice mail system telling you to call another.

Voice mail is more efficient, provided you have the patience to listen to the extensive voice mail menus. Press one wrong key and you have to start all over again. By the time I make it to the end, I find that I don't want any of the options. Here's one example:

Your call is being handled by ADIOS Voice Mail System. The party you are calling
 . P-r-e-s-i-d-e-n-t . . . C-l-i-n-t-o-n is not available now. To record your support for
 GATT, press 1. To record your support for health care reform, press 2. For other matters, please
 hang up and try again. Or you can press "Zero" and Al Gore will come on the line to assist you.

My colleagues who are voice mail hackers, however, tell me that, if you know the right codes, you can by-pass any voice mail menu and be immediately shunted to the next menu. It's possible, I'm told, that, with the right codes, you can call the IRS forms office in Baltimore and launch a B-52 from the Strategic Air Command in Colorado.

The Census Bureau has a rather complex voice mail system. That's because it has to handle messages from rotary phones. (The Census Bureau has not completely switched over to touch-tone phones. I often go out there when I feel nostalgic for the experience of "dialing" a number.) Here's what you get from their message:

If you want to leave a message for your party and are calling from a rotary phone, turn the dial right two complete revolutions, stopping at 9. Then turn left past 9 stopping at 4. Then turn right to 2. You can now lift the receiver off the hook.

As if all of this technology wasn't enough, the phone company has now introduced "Caller ID" to tell the few remaining people in America who are still answering their phones who's calling them. Then, it turns around and offers the caller "Call Blocking," so that callers can remain anonymous. You can counter, however, by subscribing to "Anonymous Call Rejection," to block the call from the bloke that blocking Caller ID. It's only a matter of time, of course, until they offer blocking of blocking of call blocking, or unbalanced incomplete blocking.

I do enjoy one benefit, however, from all of this modern communication technology: I can get away from the office and write my reports and papers in a secluded cabin and send them electronically with my modem, just as I'm doing now with this column. What's more I can send my column as a file directly to the computer that will be used to prepare camera-ready copy. So, an editor won't lay a hand on it, and I can avoid all the frustrating queries and changes made to my $\mathbb{L}^{\wedge} \varphi \acute{e} \acute{e} \acute{a} \acute{c} i o w 5 3 \$ \# @ . a d 0 h t e 8 . 5 5 \acute{u} \pi k \ddagger \ddot{z} \tilde{N}$