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Dear Reader,

How comfortable do you feel with technology? Do you enjoy exploring new gadgets? Do you feel guilty of not keeping up to date on what is the latest in the market of connectivity, or of not knowing how to make a new program on your computer work? Do you try to stay under the radar screen and figure out how to use the minimum to keep up with your colleagues? Do you think of the times when writing letters meant handwriting and postal office or can you not imagine that world without Internet that your parents talk about?

This month we share some perspectives about the impact of connectivity technology on our lives - the challenges, the demands, the possibilities.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy  
Editor

Quote of the Month

*"Honest differences are often a healthy sign of progress."*

*Mahatma Gandhi (1869 - 1948)*

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# LIM NEWS



*20 YEARS developing your leaders while they develop your business*

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# **Our Technoworld: In control or controlled?**

**By Isabel Rimanoczy**

## **The progress of technology**

We all have heard anecdotes of sudden enlightenment when a scientific discovery is made. The "Eureka!" exclamation of Archimedes points to the belief in an external reality waiting to be discovered. Influenced by this, we tend to view technological progress in a deterministic way, believing that technology is an independent force with its own logic and progress. The changes that come with it are unavoidable, unpredictable and are a given, and the only thing we can do is to try to learn to live with them. "Progress is good for you" is the underlying assumption.

More recently, the impact of technological progress on the individual has been revised. The new perspectives indicate that all progress may not be necessarily good; that technological determinism is not a given; and that we have the option to take or reject technology, depending on how we position ourselves in relation to the new technological landscape.

## **The workplace**

If we take a quick look at the workplace of these days, we realize that we live immersed in a technology - driven world. We are so surrounded by, and dependent, on technology, that it has become our essential environment, one that we cannot do without.

Let's imagine a Monday where you arrive at the office and your ID card somehow doesn't work. You try several times and finally look up for help. There he is, Oscar. Luckily, the security man knows you personally, so you can get into the building without a problem. The elevator has a very long line, maybe only one is working today? So you decide to walk up the stairs. As you sit down at your desk and switch on your computer, you realize it just doesn't want to respond to the ON button. Puzzled by something so strange, you repeat the action several times, as if your pressure on the ON button was not the right one. You try different angles too. Finally, it starts. With a sigh of relief, you wonder if the angle of touch was the clue. A minute later, a sign on the screen reads "The page cannot be displayed". You grab your phone to dial the IT help number and notice that your phone is mute. You start to feel uneasy and look around to see if others are having a similar problem, but there's no one around to check. You reach for your cell phone, only to discover that you left it at home! Is this possible!? What a Monday! But you are a person with multiple resources, so you

decide to use your blackberry to send an e-mail to the IT help desk. What is this now!? The screen of the blackberry is blank! You decide to check your palm pilot to find out if there was some special maintenance effort announced for that Monday. This screen fortunately is NOT blank, but somehow it doesn't react to the touch of your pencil, however hard you try, nor does it respond to your finger. You feel uneasy, as if a bad reality show is being scripted just for you. You begin to look around to see if others are watching you, if there is a camera and some colleagues smiling and ready to end this nightmarish game. But where is everybody? Are you early? Is it Sunday? What is it that you don't know? You sit back in your chair, scared and anxious. You feel like a stranger in your own workstation. You want to leave, go back to your car and go home to find your family in their morning routines. You're beginning to feel a cold sweat. Where is Oscar?

If this ever happens to us, in the course of fifteen minutes we may become suddenly aware of the world we are immersed in, like fish in the water, not noticing it until we are taken out of it. We would realize how much of what we do is supported and conditioned by those little technological gadgets and systems. We are fortunate that some techno-scientific nerds realized the needs we had and invented features to make our life easier.

<b>Need</b>	<b>Technology</b>	<b>Business application</b>
Communication	Internet	Overcome geographical limitations, separation
Internal communication	Intranet	Collaboration
+ Access to information	Shareware	Expand, disseminate information
Fast communication	Email	Immediate replies
+ reach	Blackberry	Keep track, stay involved
	Cell phone	Expand workspace
+ access information	Palm	
Meeting	Video conferences	Participation despite geographic location
	Teleconferences	Save travel costs and time
Records keeping	Tools to save and store	Access

### **The benefits for the individual**

For the individual, there are a number of advantages and benefits. Overcoming geographic separation allows us to be anywhere anytime, saving the cost, time and stress of travel; we are able to be hyper-connected to others. This enables participation, increasing feelings of inclusion and ownership when participating in discussions and decision-making.

Easy access to information allows us to feel up-to-date, from informed to potentially super-informed. This is particularly useful for those that experience FOMS, the new term to designate Fear Of Missing Something. Also it allows us to distinguish ourselves by always knowing something that others still haven't seen, read or heard. We can become information sources that bring others up to date. The recognition we receive in exchange is an important compensation, which makes us feel useful and appreciated.

At the same time, the personal computer has expanded the role opportunities and identity of the individuals, converting each person into his/her own secretary, accountant, creative designer and explorer. The personalized, individual workstations allow us to maintain an area of privacy, me and my screen, which may not even be visible from a side angle to those who walk by, with usernames to protect the personal area and screensavers that switch off the visible information after a while.

Like the joystick of a video game, the keyboard becomes an imaginary instrument of power; we can write and delete, send and copy. The personal computer is an ideal object, it is perceived as very close to us, we can interact with it, and it doesn't have feelings.

We are able to get more information, and get it faster. As a consequence we can get more done, in an easier, user friendly way. Screens can be split to help us stay on top of several subjects simultaneously, making for more efficient multitasking. Performance is an identity builder and we can feel in control and empowered.

### **The other side of techno environments**

Yes, the techno environment permits us to feel in control and empowered. But there is also another side.

The possibility to be anywhere, anytime means also that we are reachable anywhere, anytime. There are few chances to hide, to stay "unavailable". Technology takes away the excuses of "I didn't know; I didn't see; I was not there."

By copying emails to others, individual opinions are easily disclosed in a public domain, exposed openly to other readers, whether they are intended to be involved or not. Many uncomfortable conflicts arise by someone being copied on an email that was not supposed to be read by him/her.

Written emails lack instructions about how they are meant to be read, and so individuals will read them and infer from them the tone of their own choosing, creating new and quite possibly incorrect meanings and interpretations. A simple one-worded reply like "Why?" can be read as a challenge, as

curiosity, as criticism, as opposition, as lack of interest, as intent to postpone a decision, as lobbying or as indicating a hidden agenda. Therefore an array of new conflicts and situations to be addressed can easily arise from a single email that led, unwittingly, to an unexpected interpretation by the reader!

The new intelligent knowledge sharing programs are able to detect keywords in emails that indicate what topics are been written about in individual's emails, and many employees wonder if their emails are not actually monitored. The breach of privacy raises fears of being watched, and there are plenty of reasons to fear identity theft.

Americans love autonomy and independence, and the privacy of the workstation provides that space. But the ultimate expression of independence is very similar to isolation, according to the American Psychological Association. Extreme privacy can create feelings of disconnectedness.

This is also reflected in many contexts of production, where the individual is involved in the production process but unseen in the result. This anonymity that impedes recognition and acknowledgement was bridged by a Hewlett Packard programmer, who installed a pop-up message asking for a cookie. Technicians worked a long time to figure out how that screen came into the program and how to fix it. The programmer had left his signature, asking for a cookie (a reward, an acknowledgement?).

In this autonomous, private e-world, when the screen is turned off, where does the identity remain? Is it also turned off? When the technological environment of the individual in our vignette was disrupted, what happened to his identity? Some authors observe that automation and other applications of information technologies are capable of making our lives more efficient, but also may lead to new forms of depersonalization, disenfranchisement and fragmentation.

Identity is supported by the comfort of physicality. We in some part build our identities based on the opinions of others, who become our mirrors. What happens when our interactions become mainly virtual? In an attempt to re-establish a familiar context, computer developers named the virtual features after physical, known objects: file, folder, desktop, filing cabinet, and actions: drag, cut, paste, attach, send, recycle, save. The need to bring back comfort to a virtual, intangible environment is also seen through the attempt to create playfulness like calling a device a mouse, the design of the Yahoo! website, like the religious website that recently designed its site using the Google format, fonts and colors.

The lack of time, and sometimes one's ability to ponder and analyze the wealth of information that

flows into our life creates a "meaning gap". This gap is in turn covered up with even more stimuli. We certainly have learned to take in information much faster than former generations, but our levels of tolerance for stimuli seem to have developed an addiction which can only be satisfied with more stimuli. This doesn't imply however that we can make good meaning out of all those stimuli, especially when the meaning is not simple and obvious. We can drive while talking on the cell phone, without running through stop signs and we can pay attention in a subliminal way to the driving of other cars, to bikes, street signs, pedestrians and even landscape. I am not sure we can process more complex stimuli, like the news broadcasted on TV or the messages sent to us via advertising. We just take them as data.

The hyper-connectivity and the access to more information makes us feel we have to do (to know, to read, to respond, to participate) more than we can handle. If identity is linked to performance, the inability to comply with impossible expectations creates stress, potential burnout, ADD <sup>[1]</sup>, crisis of meaning and identity. The same environment that helps us to feel in control and powerful can also create a feeling of lack of control and powerlessness. How is this possible?

### **The compensation strategies**

The techno-culture has given us ways to compensate for some of these difficulties. The need to make contact with others has generated an explosion of digital communities. Affinity groups, alumni sites, listservs, blogs, bulletin-board systems, cybersex, religious portals offer individuals the opportunity to reestablish contact with others. Individuals bridge the isolation by establishing new connections, getting intimacy by disclosing more of themselves than they would do in a non-virtual environment, by protecting themselves behind a username, or by inventing a new identity in sites like [www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com), where members can design a new life for themselves. Individuals can lose themselves in the intimacy of anonymity, at the same that they can reach thousands of readers to their messages in a couple of hours.

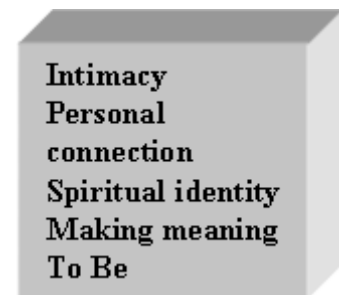
### **Managing polarities**

The conceptual framework of polarity management can give us a lens to look at these dilemmas. According to Barry Johnson's polarity management theory, we are trapped in an either/or mental model. In line with the Eastern concept of yin/yang, we need to look at the "both-and" patterns of what we normally consider contradictions. The "both-and" originates in two opposite scenarios that are both desirable.

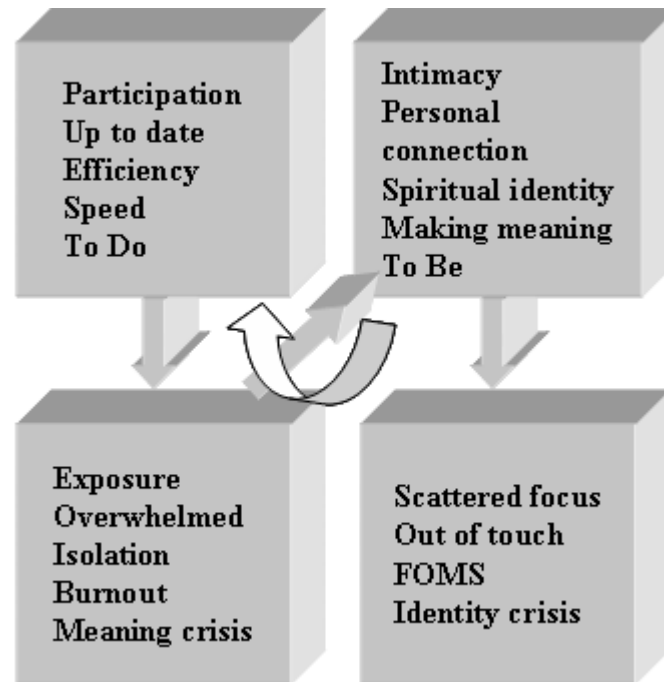
Using this framework on the dilemmas we described, we see on one side the need to be in control, to participate, to produce, to be efficient and adapted to the environment, to be updated and "in the loop" while maintaining our autonomy and privacy. It is the side of "doing".



On the opposite side, we see the need for intimacy, for disclosure, for personal connection, for connection to our community, for acknowledgement, for reassurance of the self, for spiritual identity and meaning-making. It could be called the side of the "being".




The techno-culture of our workplace environment is helpful to us in the first state, supporting our performance based identity, the one based on the "you are what you do". When this need surpasses a limit, the negative effects begin to appear. The individual moves from "in control" to distress and out of control. If she is able to react, she will swing to the opposite side to compensate. She will look for intimacy, for connectedness, for the look in the eyes of others, for spirituality and meaning. This may be found through other opportunities of the techno-culture, as is the case of the digital communities, or through more traditional, face-to-face relationships. When this need surpasses a limit, the negative effects begin to appear also here. She loses focus and capacity to produce; she gets out of touch with the context, secluded in her own protected microcosm.



According to the polarity management framework, while the ideal is to bounce between the upper two quadrants, most of the time we need to touch the boundaries with the lower quadrants in order to realize we need to "compensate". The sooner we realize this, the better our "red flag warning systems" operate, the better our chances to maintain the two competing values. However when we don't handle our polarities properly, we may as well bounce from one lower quadrant to the other, in this case, going from burnout to identity crisis. The challenge is therefore to learn how to do and to be.

### **From financial reports to smelling the roses**

We have explored the impact of the workplace techno-culture on the individuals, serving their needs for empowerment and control, as well as the threats it imposes. Through the conceptual framework of polarity management it was possible to think of the contradictions in terms of dualities that need to alternate and coexist. Individuals can learn to meet both the needs for productivity and empowerment and the needs for intimacy and spirituality if they establish warning systems that allow them to perceive when they are going over a limit, when it becomes time to compensate. Then it's time to smell the roses. 

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[1] ADD: Attention Deficit Disorder



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Editor: Isabel Rimanoczy - Editing Support: Tony Pearson  
21205 Yacht Club Drive, Suite 708, Aventura, FL 33180 - USA - Ph/Fax:  
(305) 692-4586

E-mail: [newsletter@LIMglobal.net](mailto:newsletter@LIMglobal.net) - [www.LIMglobal.net](http://www.LIMglobal.net)