

LAW and ORDER

From Underwood to WiFi

by Kevin Gordon

Having just retired the law enforcement profession after 25 years, ending my career with the position of Chief, I will use this column to cover technology that is important and of interest to the typical police department. My aim is to get technology explained to the 25 to 250 officer departments—not just what the last technology is, but how you can use it to improve your operations.

Many of veteran officers started with manual typewriters with ribbons, the ever-famous Underwood. For younger officers, these were nasty, round, ink covered nightmares and your primary task was to make sure the next guy had to change the ribbon. Much later along the technology curve, corrections were done with White Out®, known affectionately as “rookie’s milk.” Yes, I realize the new coppers have never used White Out®!

How we loved the next technological advance, the new IBM’s with the fantastic “uh-oh” key. You young officers thought the Undo command on the computer was the “uh-oh” key but we had one long before. With one keystroke you could erase a typing error. The next model could erase an entire word! Many bottles of White Out® went dry from lack of use! These IBM Selectrics are antiques to the newer officers who have probably never used carbon paper and one wonders if they know what “cc” means on a memo.

Next, we were all amazed with word processors. We could type an entire report, and then move words, sentences, and even whole paragraphs around. The great police sentence “it should be noted,” was police jargon that told every officer the writer forgot to put something important in the report and instead of retyping everything, it would be entered right afterwards, such as “it should be noted that just prior the suspect said.” Word processors made that tell-all phrase a thing of the past and it means nothing to the younger officers.

The computers we now use were as foreign to us as Underwoods are to the younger officers. These officers have always had access to email. At first, we were afraid of the department computer that they seemed so comfortable with. We learned from them that cookies and spam are not always foods, and a mouse, a virus, a worm, and a browser were not what we thought. We also learned not to be afraid of technology.

Pagers were great when they showed up and halfway through our careers, we were introduced to the large, bag phones (the original cell phone) that cost \$500-\$1000. The younger coppers may have never really dialed a phone or heard one actually ring, but their first cell fit in their pocket, was probably free, and they see no real purpose for pagers.

So now the question is how to address our police readers whose personal history runs from 21 to 60 years. I view it somewhat like the facsimile machine. Fax machines became affordable for all in the 1980s, but many folks don’t realize fax machines were invented in 1842. Alexander Bain developed a method of receiving signals by telegraph wire and turning them into images on paper.

I use a fax machine several times a week. I know you put the paper in here, “dial” the phone and “send” the fax. Even in today’s technological world that I have had much formal and informal training and that I feel very comfortable with, it amazes me that I can put a piece of paper in a fax machine and within minutes it comes out of a similar machine in Germany or China or next door.

But I don’t have a clue how it works and I don’t have to, which summarizes my view of technological perspective. We are cops—we hate to admit we don’t know something. We often have a tendency of avoiding that which we don’t understand. This results in us sometimes avoiding technology that we should embrace, AND sometimes embracing that which we should avoid.

We don't need to know why it works or even how it works. We do not need to be technological wizards. I suspect most of you can't give me a detailed description of how and why an internal combustion engine works. You just get in and use the thing. Technology is the same—the information you need is any information that helps you make informed, intelligent purchasing or utilization decisions.

This is what I hope to provide in this column: information that you can use to help with the decisions that you don't always have the time to look into yourself. If you have questions or suggestions for columns, please contact me.

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