

**THE STRESS OF TECHNOLOGY
IMPACT ON POLICING**

by

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The Command College Futures Professional Article is a study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is not to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the professional article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

THE STRESS OF TECHNOLOGY IMPACT ON POLICING

When it comes to planning for a person's death or illness, many estate planners will ask a client what actions they would want taken if they fall into a persistent vegetative state. The question is important because all individuals place a high value on the quality of their lives. And for many people, beyond whether their hearts are pumping or they are able to breathe, the "quality" of life matters so much that without it the length of their lives is not as important.

On the quantity side, human life expectancy consistently continues to rise, in part due to the role technological advances have played in medical science. Human advances in technology, however, have also impacted the quality of people's lives. Even though technology has improved, it has also had some adverse impacts. In fact, it may be making people very sick and virtually offsetting the perceived benefit both to society's quality of life and the length of human life itself. These impacts are not caused by the technology per se, but by a uniquely human byproduct, and a familiar culprit for many: Stress.

Technology and Individual Stress

The human capacity to feel stress is a primary emotional difference between humans and the rest of the animal world, where stress is limited to those situations where survival is at stake. Instead, human beings feel stress about everything (Gamow, 2006). People even feel stress about feeling stressed. In theory, technology is a mechanism to reduce that stress through innovations designed to make people's lives simpler and more efficient. In some cases it does just that. With the proliferation of the Internet, smart phones, e-mail and countless other gadgets, though, we are beginning to realize there are demands and burdens placed on society by these conveniences. This concept is called "technostress."

The term “technostress” entered our lexicon as early as 1998 to describe how technology causes people stress when it fails to function properly. (Weil & Rosen, 1998). Naturally, that stress may be even worse today when one considers the explosion of new interactive technologies introduced since 1998. Anytime one’s Internet connection is slow, or fails completely during the sending of an important e-mail or payment of a bill, or an important call is dropped by the cell phone, or the printer or copier jams, people can become very irritated and have a stress reaction. One reason people react so badly is because they have become so dependent on technology in their daily lives that when it fails to perform as they expect it to, they can have trouble coping with it. In one instance, a man in the United Kingdom became upset after his computer became “frozen” while he was working on a time sensitive essay. He lost his temper and began slamming his hands onto his laptop. He slammed “furiously” until he felt “better” (Whittaker, 2009). In the process, he damaged his hard drive to the point where it had to be replaced. Sadly (or not), many who interact with similar technologies might secretly applaud his action.

Even worse, when all of a person’s devices are working perfectly, he or she can still become overwhelmed and stressed because it is impossible to escape from it. Everyone has tasks to perform in their personal and professional lives. And for most people, these tasks are continually interrupted by text messages, cell phone calls and e-mails; even worse, these interruptions occur while people are trying to keep up with their own and their friend’s social networking posts and becoming even more annoyed because the driver in front of them is doing what they often do themselves, driving with their hand and cell phone planted in their ear, a position we immediately recognize. The work world invades the home life during off hours through technology. Personal issues that used to be resolved out of work are able to reach us

during our workday, also through technology. “Today, it is not technology that is being developed to meet the need of the man, but the man who is adapting himself to cope with fast paced technological inventions.” (Bradley, 2011).

In a 2011 article summarizing the results of a recent poll, technology was identified as a significant source of stress for British workers. (StinkInk.com, 2011). Poll participants identified technology as causing them stress for an average of 56 minutes each day, with four out of ten of the 3,000 adults polled stating identifying technology as a greater source of stress “than their love lives, domestic disputes and financial troubles.” Continual texts from a loved one or seeing one’s own photograph tagged on Facebook were also identified as annoyances.

Implications for Policing

As is the case in most modern walks of life, the policing profession has been impacted by technology. The police officer of yesterday had a gun belt and a police car with very few gadgets. The police officer of today is inundated with technology, ostensibly present to help him perform his job more effectively. The modern police officer likely has an audio or video recorder on his person or in her vehicle. Along with that comes an expectation that he will activate that device during field contacts. He likely has a TASER, a beanbag shotgun and an on board computer in his state of the art police car that is essentially a mobile office. He uses e-mail on a daily basis and types his reports on a personal computer. Yet as with any other technologies, when they eventually fail to perform as expected, the officer’s stress response will be triggered because he has come to depend on the technology. (Bradley, 2011). This stress reaction, also called “technology related anger” or “TRA” can produce violent outbursts. In a 2004 study of TRA by German sociologist Dr. Marleen Brinks, 62 percent of those surveyed admitted to yelling or swearing at their personal computers, while 31 percent admitted hitting the

computer mouse on the table or throwing it, and 15 percent acknowledged hitting the display or kicking the case. According to Dr. Brinks, technology related anger is on the rise, which may be why companies such as Microsoft and Compaq have commissioned studies on TRA. (Libbenga, 2004; AVVB, 2008).

Even when working perfectly technology will add to the officer's stress burden simply because it makes the work more complicated. The police car by itself has evolved into a mobile work space where the police officer must share that space with so much technology that he is becoming overwhelmed and distracted. A new study through St. Mary's University and the League of Minnesota Cities found that distraction created by technology in police cars is contributing to officer involved crashes. (Kare11, 2011). In November 2011, a Minnesota State Trooper ran a stop sign and collided with cross traffic. The investigation determined the trooper had been on his laptop computer moments before the crash. (Louwagie, 2011). As with any form of stress there are potential costs associated with technostress.

Impacts of Stress

It is well established that continual exposure to stress produces a specific hormone that can make people very sick, both physically and psychologically. (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Sapolsky, 1994; Maxon, 1999). In some cases, it may actually make a healthy person sick, and in other cases, it might make a sick person even sicker, or put someone at higher risk for diseases. Illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, depression, addiction, cardiovascular disease and ulcers are just some of the illnesses that can be caused by continued exposure to stress. (Sapolsky, 1994). Employers pay a heavy price for employee stress. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2001, the median number of days lost from work due to stress, anxiety and related illnesses was 25, while the median was six for all other non-fatal causes. (APA, 2010). And

even when employees make it to work, according to a report by the American Psychological Association, 51 percent of employees studied acknowledged that they were less productive at work due to stress (APA, 2010).

As technology continues to move forward with no end in sight, all employers should be especially concerned about the ability of their workforce to function and stay healthy as they become more stressed. Yet the impacts could be even more acute for police departments for several reasons. First, law enforcement is an inherently stressful occupation that is consistently listed as one of the ten most stressful careers. (Cassery, 2012). In addition, the pressures of law enforcement already place officers at greater risk for stress related illness. Even without the added burden of technostress, police officers deal with some measure of conflict on a daily basis and must be ready to make split second life or death decisions. According to a study conducted by University at Buffalo researchers stress is already taking a toll on our police officers, in terms of risk for “high blood pressure, insomnia, heart problems, PTSD and suicide.” (University at Buffalo, 2008).

It is also well established that the demands of the job already cause police officers to have higher rates of depression than the general public. (Cockcroft, 2009). Depression creates a much greater risk of suicide and statistics have shown that our police officers are not immune from turning their weapons on themselves, and might even have higher suicide rates than the general public. (Cowan, 2008). The nature of police work even impacts an officer’s ability to sleep, which in turn impacts their ability to cope with stress. In a recent study Harvard researchers found that our nation’s police officers are significantly sleep deprived, with one in three officers studied having sleep apnea. The same study found impacted officers to have a greater risk of

displaying “uncontrolled anger,” generating citizen complaints, falling asleep while driving and making serious administrative errors. (Knox, 2011).

With continued exposure to stress, an underlying level of tension is created. This constant tension, although subtle at times, begins to impact the way a person thinks. There is a clear relationship between an individual’s stress level and his tendency to make mistakes. A person’s mood, temperament and judgment are also impacted. This can lead to anxiety, depression and significant behavioral problems, both in and outside the workplace. (Russell, 2011). Researchers in the Netherlands and Hungary have also found biological evidence that stress and aggression feed off of each other. Specifically, “when we are under stress, we are more likely to fly off the handle, and when we fly off the handle, that increases our level of stress.” (Dye, 2004). In some occupations, mistakes, bad temperament and poor judgment might be inconvenient or even impact an organization’s productivity and profit. However, for law enforcement, which relies on the support of the public to be effective and makes decisions impacting people’s lives and freedom, these technostress outcomes could lead to significant dysfunction. Neither society nor the policing profession can afford such a result.

Managing Stress by Managing the Mind

As technology continues to advance, one option for reducing technostress is to become less technology reliant as a profession. However, since there are great benefits that also come with technology, the better solution is to embrace the technology of today and the future and commit to a strategy for managing police officer stress. Police departments should move toward the following:

- Comprehensive wellness programs
- Mind based techniques for stress reduction

- Mandatory participation by all members of the organization in wellness programs developed for that purpose

Police departments should develop comprehensive wellness programs that take a holistic approach to managing the stress being compounded by technology. Typical police wellness programs, where they do exist, might provide incentives for physical fitness, such as free gym membership or on site fitness equipment. EAP programs and critical incident debriefing are also often effective dealing with specific crises as they come up. While these efforts are clearly important piece of police officer wellness, modern wellness programs also need to address the threat that is equal or even greater by specifically targeting day to day stress. Given the serious threat to police officers posed by stress, wellness programs should be given the same priority as other police in-service training programs and paid for from the agency's training budget. To focus programs on stress reduction, a holistic approach is needed.

There is a growing understanding that stress is best managed by using the same tool that tends to create it—the mind. (Russell, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Gamow, 2006). Many people try to manage their stress level by managing the outside world, trying to control the very situations or circumstances they believe are causing them stress. Yet in reality, the circumstances they are exposed to aren't the real source of stress; so trying to manage them will only lead to further frustration. While traditional stress reduction techniques such as exercise, diet and sleep can be helpful to reduce the underlying level of stress, only the mind has the capacity to prevent a stressful response in the first place.

Take, for example, the line at Starbucks during the early morning hours. This can be a very stressful event for some people, especially if they are running late or just don't like waiting in a slow moving line under any circumstances. Add to that, the customer in front of them who

dares to ask a question of the barista. Yet in reality, there is nothing inherently stressful about waiting in line. It should actually be an opportunity to relax and clear the mind. There are no significant demands or pressures actually associated with being in line. The same can even be said for a traffic jam, where one's state of mind can never clear traffic no matter how frustrated they may become.

Neither of these events actually generates waves of stress that overwhelm people. Instead, the mind creates the stress by focusing on how one might be running late, or on all of the better uses for one's time. And while the level of stress might be mitigated through managing the circumstances by setting aside more time for coffee or driving, it is just a matter of time before everyone gets stuck behind the customer with a stack of coupons at the grocery store or someone slips into the open parking space seconds before them, especially when there is somewhere else to be. The most effective method to manage any stress is to discipline the mind to react appropriately. (Russell, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Gamow, 2006). Unfortunately, while this may not get anyone through the line any faster, it will leave one more relaxed and at peace when they finally get to the front of the line as well as all points in between.

As it turns out, the modern day problem of stress has ancient solutions. Whether the source of stress is the common, technostress or waiting in line, even the medical profession is recognizing that the mind-body model holds the key to controlling stress. The Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center is one program demonstrating the power of this model. The program recognizes that stress is a significant cause of mental and physical illness and pain and treats large numbers of patients through "mindfulness meditation." Although the term "meditation" might still conjure up images of a hippie sitting in the lotus position for some, the Massachusetts program has helped move the ancient practice of meditation

from the esoteric toward the mainstream (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Positive Self Development.com, 2012).

The program has been remarkably successful and has helped large numbers of people deal with stress, pain and anxiety. There are many ways to practice meditation, but one simple form involves simply sitting, closing your eyes, and focusing on the breathing. Meditation can be practiced on an airplane, and there is even a form of “walking meditation”. Although it takes time to develop skill at meditation, and regular practice is necessary, meditating for only 20 minutes a day can train the mind to cope with stress over a period of time.

Interestingly, there is scientific evidence that explains the effect that mediation can have on the brain. Research conducted at Massachusetts General Hospital has suggested that meditation can increase gray matter density in portions of the human brain associated with “self-awareness, compassion, and introspection” and decrease gray matter density in portions of the brain associated with stress and anxiety. (Boyce, 2012). Meditation lowers the heart rate, normalizes blood pressure, reduces hormones caused by stress and strengthens immunity. It has even been said that “the body gains a deeper, more significant rest from 30 minutes of meditation than it does from 30 minutes of sleep.” (Miranda, 2011). Additional research is ongoing, and scientific interest in the benefits of meditation has never been stronger. In 2008, the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds was established at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. One goal of the Center is to validate the benefits of regular meditative practice through science.

The police wellness program of today should incorporate mind-based techniques such as mediation or yoga. One former police officer is already merging meditation and policing. Having seen the great impact that meditation and mindfulness has made in her life, Officer Cheri Maples has taught the techniques to more than 1,000 officers and regularly holds workshops and

retreats across the nation. (McCollum, 2011). Once meditation is taught and learned, it can be practiced virtually anywhere, even in a designated quiet room within a police facility. There are no ongoing costs and no equipment is required. The only real costs to implement such a program would be in teaching officers how to perform it. Police departments could either partner with a local program such as the Massachusetts program, or retain local consultants to teach the practice.

Finally, police managers should give serious consideration to make some level of participation mandatory. Teaching police officers how to meditate, and then giving them the opportunity or requiring them to participate during work hours, is not much different from compelling specialized officers, such as SWAT personnel, to physically exercise on duty. The research University at Buffalo research demonstrates there is as great a need for mental “exercise” as physical, and the law enforcement profession is not currently meeting the needs of its officers in this area. (University at Buffalo, 2011). Rather than just providing opportunities to improve wellness for police officers and then hoping for the best, police departments should educate officers about their stress and wellness, provide them all the tools and opportunity for improvement and maintenance, and then insist upon it.

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