

A Necessary Evil? Lessons From Technology Meltdowns

John Hayes Jr., DC, MS, DACBO

By now, many of you are aware of the catastrophic server failure that struck our clinic. I have a clinic with 10 computer clients, all of whom work to the max all day long. A business-class server runs this entire client system. We also have a terminal service, remote dial-in and a SonicWALL hard firewall. Pretty much bulletproof (for three years and one week). One week out of warranty, the server fails.

I have long prided myself on the extensive (early and frequently upgraded) use of technology in practice. Indeed, it has been a hallmark of success and has allowed me to maintain a large practice in these rapidly changing times and escalating data management requirements.

As we are getting back to normal in terms of practice operations, some very poignant lessons are emerging. First, we are in really good shape. No patient or clinic data was lost, due to redundant back-ups and mirrored hard drives. We did, however, lose some custom templates and settings. They are probably in a file that was corrupted.

Nonetheless, it has been 40-plus hours of labor at a minimum \$100 per hour, plus software support at \$5 per minute, getting things integrated and operational again. We already are pushing \$7,000 in costs, not to mention the time and extra staffing needed to re-enter an entire week's worth of data from the paper records we managed.

The good news is I might actually get some reimbursement from my business-overhead insurance policy (provision on equipment and media failure). That could take some of the financial bite away. And like so many things in life, unexpected side benefits emerged.

First of all, as stressful as it was to be stripped of their usual tools, my staff rose to the challenge very quickly and immediately were able to fall back on their redundant but very simple paper systems.

Second, both the front and back parts of the office realized how much more enjoyable patient encounters are. I believe this is because both areas of the practice were able to donate 99 percent of their encounter time to simply greeting and interacting with the patients. In the usual day, we probably spend a minimum of 20 percent of encounter time on record-keeping. And don't you know (of course), without this hassle, our office volume jumped as well.

Like so many areas of life in this day and age, technology isolates us and strips us of valuable, humanistic interactive time. Indeed, is this not where the real joy in practice still comes from? I dispute anyone who loves the healing arts and says otherwise.

In any event, once we were back up and running, I redesigned our routine patient encounters. I further simplified routine record-keeping through the redesign and extensive use of customized but editable templates. Last week, when I shared the new designs with my staff, we were all amazed at how obvious this all should have been.

Another extraordinary side benefit of this entire experience was that many patients commented on how our office procedures did not seem to miss a beat. Other than the fact we could not provide precise account balances, the office remained fully functional, productive and attuned to the immediate needs of patient care. We were actually able to train a new front-desk person in the midst of our technology meltdown. And yes, she did stay on, enjoying our patients as well as her new team's flexibility.

What's the take-away message here? Honestly, I recommend if you haven't spent time reviewing what gives you the most joy and satisfaction in your office, refocus your attention in that direction. I also caution you to employ technology as a tool, but never become a slave to it. As I've advocated in the past, realize that we all have the need, not the obligation, to be unplugged from technology, engaging quiet time whenever possible. This means no computer, cell phone, PDA, pager, TV or radio.

In any event, I hope you will be able to learn from our experiences. Technology is absolutely necessary for anyone running a private practice, but it does not have to be evil. Like Sarah Connor from "The Terminator" movies, be ever-vigilant for the rise of the machines!

Make sure you know your software inside and out. Make sure you have support teams that will be available to you when you need them. Make sure there is redundancy in all your systems.

However, do not become a slave to the technology you employ. Figure out better and better ways to employ technology to help bring you more joy, peace and prosperity in practice. Most importantly, don't forget to unplug from everything on a regular basis. Get outside, do something physical, read a great book by the ocean or in the mountains. I guarantee your entire perspective on practice and life will change immeasurably.

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