

On Being Where You Are

by Kelly Addy, Civil Deputy City Attorney, Billings, Montana

Carole King was probably just waxing romantic when she sang, "So far away. Doesn't anybody stay in one place anymore?"

But she was capturing a glimpse of the future, too. That future is now.

Maybe you remember calling a phone number and asking whoever answered, "Who is this?" That has changed. Now we ask, "Where are you?"

It seems like a small change. But our relationship to our technology has turned our lives inside out. Even as I sit here in my little office with a magnificent view of the back wall of my fair City's parking garage, I am not alone.

This past year, I watched a federal judge retire suddenly, abruptly, and without a retirement party because he did not realize this new fact of life. He thought the emails he was forwarding to friends were 'just between friends.'

When a friend forwarded his message to someone who was offended by the joke in the email, though, it became a very public matter. Everyone in town, in the state, the nation and the world got to sit at his virtual desk to read the forwarded email. It cast doubt on his fitness to serve as a judge.

After a few months of news updates on the investigation into the matter, the judge hung up his spurs for good. He was a successful trial attorney, teaching at seminars and taking calls from other attorneys who thought he could help them with some problem vexing them. After his ordeal ended he was still described by as "a good and honest trial lawyer and an esteemed trial judge."

This amazing adventure in cyberspace that we have been on for many years now has confounded people far smarter and more powerful than I am. Why is that? What great leap forward do we not understand here?

Maybe we think we are sitting at our little workstations having a private chat with the person we have in mind as we type. We would be closer to the truth if we saw ourselves sitting at mid-court in Madison Square Garden with ten thousand people watching us.

Then we look around and it's still that little office with the nice view. The door is closed. There are no cameras or phones in the room. Aren't we alone? Millions of years of human history have conditioned our bodies and minds to assure us we are.

In our generation, though, we have jumped out of time. We are connected to the whole planet the minute we fire up our trusty desktop and login in as citizens of the world.

Carole was right. Nobody stays in one place anymore.

So I have been on a campaign lately to give this advice to everyone who works for my city and wants to know what I think about something: Call me. Don't send me an email. Pick up that telephone on your desk and call me. Better yet, stop in and visit.

This gives me two advantages over email. First, I start thinking of questions right away. I don't wait until the end of the explanation before I start asking questions about the issue.

We have two people working on the same problem at the same time and we are stretching each other and our common understanding of the problem.

It is not so much back and forth, like a tennis match, as a collaboration of two people trying to understand the problem of the hour better. We are on the same side, reaching for the best result anyone can envision.

Second, I get more information. Part of that is due to the collaborative nature of oral conversation. But I can also hear the voice of the person on the phone or see their face across the table.

Are they nervous or calm, confident or angry? Are they in control of their thinking or having a runaway? All of these things come through over the telephone or in person much better than in an email. I think of them as the old fashioned version of metadata.

Then, too, we haven't created a public record of some half-hatched thought that we both laugh at as soon as either of us (usually me) says it out loud. We question our own understanding more deeply when we hear the hums and murmurs on the other end of the line or see the look watch the face across the table.

We become more conscious of the layers in the question. We are mindful that we might not be seeing everything that we need to see. There is almost always more to it than you thought at first. Talking gets that on the table.

Our Municipal Attorney's List is a great way to do open-source problem solving. Pitfalls and solutions abound online, and when time is short it's my life line.

But my desktop can be a seductive partner, too, giving me only part of the story and not reminding me I have about as much privacy as a disc jockey at a radio station.

It is a worldwide radio station. The microphone is open. You are on the air. What is it you wanted to tell everyone in the world today?

Why can't anybody stay in one place anymore? **ML**

