

Held Hostage by Technology? Get Unwired!

By Sharon D. Nelson and John W. Simek

© 2006 Sensei Enterprises, Inc.

It was with some amazement that we recently heard several colleagues lamenting that “we feel like hostages to our technology.” The tales of woe varied, but they all carried the same underlying message. One lawyer said he could never rest easy after dinner, but always had to rush to his home office several times a night in case there was business e-mail to attend to. A second told of feeling captive to his BlackBerry because the law firm’s senior partner seemed to expect near-instantaneous responses to e-mails, even expecting him on a trial day to respond to the partner’s e-mail during court breaks. A third complained that clients, especially if they know that their lawyers have BlackBerrys or similar devices, expect rapid-fire responses irrespective of where the lawyer is or what he might be doing. And a fourth sadly bemoaned that she never really takes a true vacation anymore, noting wryly that it would be more accurate to say that “when I take a vacation, sometimes my laptop gets a great view.”

To these and other colleagues who feel much the same, the authors (truly among the most wired people on the globe) have some blunt and perhaps unexpected advice from two folks who make their living from technology: **GET UNWIRED!**

We came by this advice honestly: we earned it. While our friends marvel at what they term our “serenity,” this serenity did not happen overnight – it was learned over years as we adjusted to the high tech world in which we live and work. We too dashed to the home office after dinner looking for e-mails and suffered withdrawal pangs when we couldn’t connect to the Internet. On one memorable trip, when we were unable to get so much as a dial-up connection in a remote Montana lodge, we waited up to an hour a day in a tiny public library to take our turn at 30 minutes of Internet access on one of their two machines. Anyone with any sense would have been on the gloriously beautiful Madison River, giving the rainbow trout a giggle at our rookie attempts to hook them.

Because we are both Type A (if there were an A+++ , that would be us), changes to our routine came slowly. Based on the lamentations of our colleagues as noted above, perhaps detailing some of our changes might be helpful, even inspirational. There is life after the Internet!

The first thing we did is recognize that we had a problem. This, of course, is the first step to recovery in any addiction – and make no mistake about it, there are PLENTY of us addicted to or unwilling victims of our technology.

Slowly, we begin to make adjustments.

- **Clients are almost never given our home and cell phone numbers.** If our phones ring after bedtime, it is always one of our six children or our staff, who know better than to call us without good reason. Getting stopped by a cop at 1 a.m. Saturday morning and failing a sobriety test isn’t our first choice of why our

children should call, but it does constitute a good reason. And because we support the IT functionality of law firms, we do have a pager on 24X7, but woe betides the client who uses it in a non-emergency. We have “fired” several clients for chronic pager abuse.

- **Minus unusual circumstances, we do not check e-mail after dinner.** This new approach to e-mail made a dramatic change in the quality of our lives. We watch movies without interruption, play animated and comically combative cribbage games, and roll around on the floor with our labs. (A plug here for owning dogs: they are bundles of therapy encased in fur – forget the therapists and their Gargantuan bills – get a low tech friend who adores you even when look, feel and even smell less than wonderful) After a relaxing evening, we wind down in bed reading or fading to something on TV (we do here pay tribute to one of the great modern inventions, the “sleep timer” on the TV remote). If we are expecting instructions about tomorrow’s trial from an attorney, we might break our unwritten rule about checking e-mail, but such things are rare. Whether you know it or not, when you pick up that business e-mail at night, your attention to business is making your blood pressure rise. You lose the post-prandial sense of relaxation that leads naturally to a restful night’s sleep. And guess what? That e-mail won’t go anywhere – it will still be there in the a.m. So what if your colleague or client doesn’t have enough sense to play by the same rules and sends you nocturnal missives? You have the choice to be smarter!
- **We deliberately engage in non-wired activities.** This became a pure health issue as we both have combated Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, but it also became just plain apparent that we were spending waaaay too much time at our keyboards! Over the last few years, we have become extensive gardeners, tending our herbs, shrubs and flowers with painstaking care. Along the way, we soak up some sun, have fresh herbs most of the year for our cooking, and get a little exercise. We also work for Lab Rescue – not that we have any prejudice against other dogs, but we know the Labrador breed well. We foster homeless dogs, transport them to good-hearted vets and kennels and go to Adoption Days to find them what we rescue folks call “forever homes.” It may be canine lives we are saving, not human, but it feels absolutely great – and it is a completely non-tech activity that gets us out of our offices. It doesn’t matter a whit what non-wired activities you choose, from quality time with spouses and children to trying your hand at skydiving, but divorce yourself for significant periods of time from you keyboard!
- **We exercise our bodies.** Who among you, gentle readers, has not decried our sedentary lifestyle? We hunch over our keyboards, ruining our posture and causing infernal pain to our lower backs. We take minuscule periodic “breaks” to answer calls of Mother Nature or consult a colleague. It took us a long time, and the testimony of an unrelentingly accurate scale, to persuade us that this lifestyle had to change. We now regularly take walking breaks at work, take stairs instead of elevators and have invested in (and actually use, which seems to be the real trick) an elliptical while catching up with the morning news. We weigh less, have

abundantly more energy, think more quickly and keenly and one of us even had a diagnosis of diabetes reversed after sustained weight loss lowered blood sugars to normal levels. How can you beat “unwired” results like that? Both you and your clients get a win-win.

- **We moderate our wired activities on vacation.** True confession time here. We cannot entirely abandon our wired lifestyle on vacation, and many of you may not be able to either. We own and operate a business, so we must, at least marginally, stay in touch. However, we do have a rational set of rules. While one of us waits for the other to shower in the morning, we check e-mail. That’s it for the e-mail until we return to our lodgings in the late afternoon, when it gets one final check. If we can’t check e-mail at all, we can leave an “away” message so those who write us will understand we are gone and cannot respond. We call in once and only once a day to the office. Our staff can call or page us in an emergency, but emergencies are thankfully rare. We do not hesitate to turn our cell phones off if we want privacy. The caller can leave a message or page in the event of an emergency. Each of you will have your own comfort level, but our twice a day habit leaves most of our vacation a vacation and still keeps the business (and hence the cash register that funds our vacations!) humming along.
- **The car is NOT your office.** It amazes us how, in spite of all the alarming statistics, attorneys are prone to conduct business in the car. Sometimes, granted, it is unavoidable. For those times, we have hands free phone units in our cars, which is at least a reasonable compromise. But for the most part, driving time is a really good time to pay attention to driving. The relation of cell phone usage to accidents is staggeringly clear, and yet we continue as a society to cause all manner of traffic accidents because we cannot seem to disconnect ourselves in the car, absent the passage of a law which compels it. Listen to music, a recorded book, or podcasts. Use the time to learn or simply to relax – you can “give it heck” when you get back to the office.

How do you find time to do all of the above when you’re so busy practicing law?

Our epiphany was this: by maximizing every billable minute, we were minimizing our lives. We were less healthy, less energetic and assuredly less happy.

No longer. We made a conscious effort to break old habits and structure our lives into more gratifying units of work, exercise, play and relaxation. We are healthier and happier as a result, and no longer feel (well, too often) held hostage by our technology.



If you are terrorized by your technology, now and again you must stab it in the heart so you can breathe. Never fear, it will - like the phoenix of ancient lore - always rise again. But for that brief period of time in which you have

rendered it comatose and you can plant your foot on its body in triumph, you may say as we do in Virginia, *sic semper tyrannis*.