

Technology Induced Incompetence

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Back when I was a kid ... Oh, God. I don't want to start this article that way. I sound like my Grand Dad. Well, maybe I do. Maybe I should accept that. Maybe not. I've heard him, and others, claim that life was simpler back 'in the day.' I'm not sure what that phrase means, but I take it to mean in ancient times. And, I agree. Life was probably simpler, but not nearly as efficient. It certainly wasn't easier.

Plowing a field using a mule takes a lot more effort and time than plowing it with a tractor. Feeding a mule and giving it water is simpler than changing a tire or greasing the wheels on the tractor, but you had to feed the mule twice a day and grease the tractor once a year. Which one is easier is arguable.

Keeping these observations in mind is recommended, but being simpler or easier is really not the topic of the article.

What I want to present is how technology has changed our personal capabilities, not whether or not tasks are easy or simple.

As recently as 1962 when I was first entering into the world of being able to do things for myself, my friends and I were able to sharpen our own knives, skin an animal, tan a hide, change the oil in the car by ourselves, hunt squirrel, paint a barn or a cabinet, use a hammer, sandpaper, or a pliers. We did a lot of our own plumbing too. We wrote with a pen and in long hand (cursive). The math we did mostly in our heads, but we did know how to use a pencil for the more difficult problems. We learned spelling under the watchful eye of a teacher or a parent.

Over time, typing a letter on a typewriter became the standard. Electric typewriters replaced manual ones. Word processors replaced typewriters. Dictaphone software replaced word processors and spell check replaced the need to know how to spell. And there you have it. That last domino in the series I mentioned is where we go off the rails. We don't need to spell. We don't need to know grammar. When reading, we don't even need to have a robust vocabulary. The computer will tell us what the words mean. All we need to do is ask. "So what?" you ask. "It's easier and more efficient!"

True, but only if the machinery is in working order.

I use language, and the recording of it, only to introduce the larger concern: general reliance on the gadgets that make life easier and the inability to cope when the gadget is broken. As a college professor, I actually had a student who was unable to divide 800

by 4 without using the calculator on the cell phone. Instead of sketching whatever it was that I had placed under the microscope, students took photographs through the eyepiece, completely negating the benefit of having to make a drawing; a benefit derived from having to look closely at each part of what was being drawn. Term papers were turned in late because the internet was down. People were absent from field trips because their GPS took them in the wrong direction. Of course, they had entered the location wrong, but still blamed the failure on the gadget. Now, we even have self-driving cars. But, that's a different topic which I've already addressed elsewhere (*Self-Driving Cars: Predictions of Failure*, 2018).

The reliance on gadgets has led to online banking and buying. Solving banking problems is done with a conversation between a human and a computer. Text messaging has replaced the elegance of having a conversation, and most emphatically, the skill and tact needed to end a conversation. There is even a name for it. If a friend doesn't want to be your friend any longer, they stop texting you. It's called 'ghosting.' I know people who have been fired from certain jobs by being ghosted.

The next development may come from the ever-widening gap between those who build the gadgets and those who use them. The builder is, to some degree, still capable and competent. The user doesn't understand the inner workings of the gadget and is totally dependent on it. This phenomenon is not new either. Watch any old movie and you might see a television that has lost its picture. Someone slaps it on the side and it works again. I've heard that this also works on vending machines.

The gap between the creators and the consumers may well lead to a societal divide that will intellectually enslave the consumer. Don't believe me? Ask yourself what the effect of the frozen dinner has had on the ability of people to cook for themselves. Sure, many people can still cook, but I know people who don't even have a stove; just a microwave.