

A Chill at the Specter of BlackBerry Winter

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Life's Work

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THE route of most technology is from "Why would anyone need that?" to "How did I ever live without it?" When Tom Cruise used a cordless phone in "Risky Business," I remember thinking the device was a gimmick. When the first fax machine was installed near my desk in the newsroom (one machine, back then, for hundreds of reporters), I thought, "Don't messenger services deliver clearer copies?" And I was more than a little skeptical (not to mention spooked) when I first heard a car talk and give the driver directions.

I am now a huge fan of all these things. That is why I am watching, with a mix of anthropological fascination and sympathetic dread, the possibility that, for the first time, the trend of technology might be reversed. If a court rules in favor of the plaintiffs in a patent lawsuit later this month, all our BlackBerry technology might go dark.

I don't actually have a BlackBerry. I get my e-mail the old-fashioned way — using "pull" technology, which requires me to log onto my computer (or hunt and peck on my cellular phone) as opposed to BlackBerry's "push" technology, which automatically delivers all e-mail to the device. But I feel the panic in the messages I've been receiving lately from heavy users who fear having to return to the Stone Age, being only in sporadic, rather than constant, e-mail contact.

"I look forward to it as much as a regular root canal," says Richard Laemer, chief executive of RLM Public Relations in New York, who is an early adopter, having had one of the original models since 1997. Every night he turns the device to silent mode, but he never turns it off, the better to check messages if he wakes up at night.

Josh Glantz, vice president and managing director of ePrize, an interactive promotions agency in Manhattan, says, "My wife calls my BlackBerry my mistress." He once spent his wife's birthday dinner clicking under the table, checking for messages, and has been seen in the local kiddie pool with his two young sons, knee-deep in the water, tapping the keys on his BlackBerry.

Brad Wilson, partner and chief operating officer of James Hotels, said: "I would probably implode without it. It's basically my life in a little black box. The thought of having that umbilical cord cut is frightening."

And so it goes, in messages (nearly all sent on BlackBerries) from across the country. From Chicago, where Charles Melidosian, the chief information officer of Baird & Warner Real Estate, has taken to checking messages in his walk-in closet, because his wife has declared their bedroom a BlackBerry-free zone. From Destin, Fla., the headquarters of the Telwares telecommunications company, which had to develop policies to forbid employees from taking BlackBerries into the restrooms, because too many were being dropped in the toilets. From Beverly Hills, Calif., where Scott Mitchell Rosenberg, chairman of Platinum Studios, carries two BlackBerries, on two different servers, so he will never be without service. From Coral Gables, Fla., where Gabrielle Garcia, senior vice president at Kreps-DeMaria Inc., a marketing firm, once broke her thumbnail, resulting in typos and an emergency text message to her manicurist requesting a repair ASAP.

Need is relative, of course, and for every, say, thousand people who feel they need this technology, there is probably one who really does. Dr. T. Alan Hurwitz, for instance, dean of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology, reminds me that text messaging has transformed life for the hearing impaired. His BlackBerry does for him what the phone did for the rest of us a century ago. In spite of inflammation and pain from "BlackBerry thumb," he sees the device as an extension of himself.

Dr. Maurice A. Ramirez, in turn, describes his BlackBerry use as a matter of life and death. He is an emergency room physician in central Florida, and was on a medical team that arrived in New Orleans immediately after Hurricane Katrina. All phone lines were

down and most cellphones were unusable, but his Treo 650 phone, with BlackBerry technology, continued to send and receive e-mail much of the time.

Does he have a plan in the event of a BlackBerry blackout? "I'm a disaster-preparedness expert," he said. "I have a plan for everything." He knows that Research in Motion, the company that makes the BlackBerry, is assuring customers that it has a "workaround" plan ready to put in place should it lose this patent case. But that's not enough for Dr. Ramirez. His personal plan is to "reconfigure my Sprint PCS e-mail to accept everything on a push basis."

Mr. Wilson, the hotel executive, says his plan is not nearly as sophisticated. "I'm pretty much in denial," he says. "I guess I'll be hunting for phones and hot spots in airports."

But, he says, a blackout might not be that bad. "Maybe it will make us all better people," he says. "We'll talk more."

This column about the intersection of jobs and personal lives appears every other week. E-mail: Belkin@nytimes.com.