

# BRIDGING THE GAP

## BETWEEN TELECOMMUNICATOR AND TECHNOLOGY

The staff's ability to learn to use new technology is key to making the most of it.

By Renee Gordon and Daniel Guttormson



**F**or years, the public safety communications industry endured an increasing gap between the telecommunicator and mission-critical technologies. This gap has an array of complexities — for example the rapid pace of technological advances and the lag time in local government’s time to procure. By the time budgets are discussed, request for proposals are submitted, and the actual product is procured and effectively implemented, new technology is already on the horizon. However, of these issues, the most significant complexity is the learning component from generation to generation.

This article represents two views on the telecommunicator technology gap, and how building better relationships and processes internally and externally can bridge the gap.

#### **RENEE GORDON**

I am a baby boomer and I represent the last generational year of the boomers. I am fascinated at how fast and easy the later generations flow with technology changes.

As I hunt and peck to send a simple text, millennials text at lightning speed and can do it blindfolded.

The emergency communications center (ECC) has changed. I grew up in a world where I first used a telephone with a handset and held it to my ear. I answered my first 9-1-1 call using this now almost obsolete contraption. Computer aided dispatch (CAD) had been introduced to our industry, yet I found that not everyone had embraced how it changed the way a call for service was processed.

As a baby boomer, I trust paper and pen. We learned to communicate by writing, and I have not completely transitioned to the keyboard and computer screen. I am accustomed to trusting something I can hold in my hand and scribble changes as I think. It’s hard not to use paper and pen to ensure ideas, thoughts and critical information won’t get lost.

Paper and pen programming are barriers to fully embracing technology and cause a gap for some of my generation. I still have paper around the house to jot down my grocery list as I think of things. Whereas my niece always has her phone and immediately pulls it out, enters her items or tells Alexa. I have no idea what Alexa does with that list.

Daniel is a millennial, and I am fascinated by how well he changes with technology. He will now looking at the other generations the way I look at millennials.

#### **DANIEL GUTTORMSON**

As a millennial in the industry I find myself at the 50-yard line, writing some stuff down on paper and pushing myself to use the newest technology. When I came into the industry just over six years ago, my agency had an enhanced 9-1-1 (E9-1-1) telephone system and a capable CAD system. After that brief period, our industry is in a place where we are call taking, dispatching and supervising from home. We are improving location accuracy and reducing response times. We are committed to providing a higher level of service.

Technology has advanced to the point that now we can witness accident scenes through cell phone cameras and communicate through text messaging. This combination

**“Once a new employee comes in the door they bring something new to the table, and we are learning how best to use this array of skills and knowledge. We find that the newer generations are training older generations how to use the technology more efficiently.”**

of technology makes call processing more efficient for both the call taker and units responding to the scene.

Historically, we could only rely on information provided by a caller. This method gets complicated and sometimes vague under stress and crisis. As technology progresses, the telecommunicator gains a more holistic understanding of the scene. Location accuracy is determined by several data points. These data points give the call taker a more accurate caller location than one data point from the caller’s cell phone.

Our ECCs are made up of many generations, from baby boomers to Generation Z. The decades of experience brought by boomers, coupled with the technological knowledge and excitement of Gen Z, produce a fascinating dynamic within our ECCs. Gone are the days when only the most senior telecommunicators are supervisors, instructors or educators. Once a new employee comes in the door, they bring something new to the table, and we are learning how best to use this array of skills and knowledge. We find that the newer generations are training older generations how to use the technology more efficiently.

The world we live in makes remarkable strides in technology every day. Keeping pace with these advancements as public sector entities and private sector vendors will help us continue providing the highest possible level of service to our communities. In addition to the routine changes and upgrades, external factors are forcing ECCs into the next generation of public safety communications.

Global events, most recently the COVID-19 pandemic, pushed organizations to implement processes, procedures and initiatives that are rare or haven’t been done before. But staying on pace is directly related to governmental processes. There must be a clear understanding of the scope, scale and time sensitivity of the need. And the need is today, not tomorrow.

The introduction of new technology and staff training is the most crucial stage of the implementation process. How technology is portrayed to staff and their ability to use it will make or break your

organization's investment. The introduction is where it's essential to work closely with vendors to provide training materials and in-person or on-the-job training opportunities. Additionally, choosing appropriate administrators or superusers within your organization will play a critical role in implementation success.

ECCs everywhere have managed mass casualty incidents or have made significant changes in operations due to COVID-19. Now, we're benefiting from these ECCs publishing their lessons learned. From executive leadership to floor employees, the full range of staff is communicating and engaging with ECCs and vendors to understand best practices and implement positive change within their organization. If we look back over the past two years, ECCs across the country and around the globe have set the tone for how the future telecommunicator looks.

#### A MEETING OF THE MINDS

The baby boomer and the millennial agree it is essential to recognize the complexities between the telecommunicator and technology. Recognizing gaps and formulating plans

“**Make sure your trainers are well versed in adult learning techniques. We all learn differently and adaptation is critical.**”

to address those gaps will help ECCs maintain staff and keep the work environment from becoming toxic.

#### GENERATION LEARNING COMPLEXITY

Failure to take account of generation learning complexity creates gaps between technology and the telecommunicator. The generation learning complexity is based on the expectation of how we manage and use our technology. It requires an understanding of how each generation learned and continues to learn.

Design training that includes tolerance of the learning styles and trust that the newest generations can be instructors to older

generations, and that they can guide their elders to more efficient paths for using new technologies.

Consider the generational eras and what some of the barriers may be. Make sure your trainers are well versed in adult learning techniques. We all learn differently and adaptation is critical.

#### PACE COMPLEXITY

The pace of technology changes is exciting. Go to conferences or other events and take some time to understand how products work. Build relationships with public sector entities and private sector vendors. Ask questions and make sure your department is purchasing the best product for your organization. Everyone in the organization should have a part, and the end-user and the technical staff should have a significant role in the selection.

An entity can control the pace. We can't always chase the new shiny toy, and the pace should be no faster than the organization can adapt, learn and embrace. If the organization is not in sync with where its staff can meet, they will be overwhelmed by the pace and miss the best parts, Just like drinking from

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a fire hose; you can't consume it all so the rest goes to waste.

### PROCUREMENT COMPLEXITY

Procurement complexity is the opposite of pace complexity. Procurement can take a long time for some jurisdictions, and technology has already changed by the time a new product is procured. Our recommendation is to work with your procurement office and vendors to ensure the time to procure is moving at a pace that does not make your

product old. This will build a relationship with the vendors to ensure you get the latest and greatest tested product. ●

**Renee Gordon** has served as the Director for the Alexandria (Virginia) Department of Emergency Communications since 2015. Renee is an appointed Commissioner for the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA). Previously, she was the Director of 911 and Emergency Communications in Baltimore.

**Daniel Guttormson** is a Watch Officer at the Department of Emergency & Customer Communications in Alexandria, Virginia. Guttormson has been in the public safety industry for nine years, both in the field and in the center. He is passionate about innovation and supports the department in making changes that better the level of service to the community and ease the process for the telecommunicator.

## CDE EXAM #61708

### QUESTIONS

- Name three complexities that create gaps between the telecommunicator and technology.
  - Generational learning
  - Pace
  - Procurement
  - Organization
- What can be a barrier to fully embracing technology to some baby boomers?
  - Bifocal glasses
  - Paper and pen
  - Younger generations
  - Midnight shift
- Technology now allows us the ability to call take, dispatch and supervise from home.
  - True
  - False
- We can only rely on the location given by a caller.
  - True
  - False
- \_\_\_\_\_generations are training \_\_\_\_\_generations how to utilize technology more efficiently.
  - Newer; older
  - Slower; faster
  - Older; newer
  - Greatest; worst
- Global events, most recently being the COVID-19 pandemic, pushed organizations to implement processes, procedures and initiatives that are rarely done or that haven't been done before.
  - True
  - False
- When considering learning complexities, always consider \_\_\_\_\_. (Choose all that apply)
  - Generational eras
  - What some barriers may be
  - There will be no barriers
  - The generation does not matter
- To keep up with the pace of technology changes, you should go to conferences and other events.
  - True
  - False
- The pace of technology for an organization should be no faster than the organization can adapt, learn and embrace.
  - True
  - False
- Building relationships with vendors should ensure you are getting the latest and greatest tested product.
  - True
  - False

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