

Spare Change

Advice for Handling the Pandemic-Induced Technology Shift

In discussions surrounding technology, the word ‘virus’ normally invokes shudders and recollections of harrowing events dealing with lost files and hours wasted. Not this year. Technology has enjoyed a boost as a side effect from the current pandemic.

The last few months have brought sweeping changes, and technology has been in the middle of everything. Despite geographic isolation, connectedness has abounded through the use of the Internet and its related technologies, that is, social media, video conferencing, online shopping, telehealth and more. The onset of this change was abrupt, yet the digital systems to which the world shifted have been in place for many years. Some of these changes will impact water systems and small cities to varying degrees. So, what actually happened? And what happens from here?

What happened?

Just as the flow of water finds another path when blocked, many humans found ways around the challenges of stay home regulations. We may not get a sense of this time in history until years pass and add perspective, as much of this technological shift was already happening, albeit at a slower pace. However, we can already see behavioral changes in the way we use technology, even at this early date.

Some technologies that were already on the rise experienced a marked spike. Productivity technologies in particular enjoyed an increase. Among those skyrocketing in number of users and time of connectivity include Zoom, Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Hangouts. No doubt development teams were working overtime to provide greater capacity, security and features.

Other technologies took a noticeable downturn or stagnated in growth. The New York Times recently conducted an analysis of how we are changing our technology consumption. What they found is that ‘we are looking to connect and entertain ourselves but are turning away from our phones¹. Staring at small screens is apparently not as fun as it once was. The Times compared use of the popular social sites Facebook, Netflix, and YouTube, and found increases as high as 27 percent on the website versions, while the app versions of the same entertainment technologies saw an average of one (1) percent decrease.

Ironically, another surprising shift showed up in their findings. During a period of assumed decreased in-person activity, a clear surge in technology-based activity is evident. With sports seasons canceled, ESPN watchers are turning to entertainment apps like TikTok to create their own

performances to watch. Similarly, the leading site for streaming game play Twitch is supporting online gaming with friends. Could it be we are becoming participants instead of spectators?

What happens from here?

When I teach skydiving, one of the most important topics is landing the parachute. And of course, discussions must include how to land in an unfamiliar area that might hold obstacles like trees or fences. If a parachutist sees an obstacle in their path for landing, they should decide well in



1. Koeze, E., Popper, N. (2020, April 7). The virus changed the way we internet. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/07/technology/coronavirus-internet-use.html>

Trends to watch for that affect water systems and small cities using technologies that have been already available:

Contactless payments. Consumers are asking for ways to pay without being in person. Make sure your website accommodates online payments and viewing of their bill. The KanPay program overseen by the Kansas Department of Commerce is a good resource, or search the KRWA website in the Conference area for the many available online payment options.

Self-serve information. On your website, make sure customers can find answers to all the questions regularly asked. If you are not sure what to include, keep a log for a few days on the topics of calls or emails that come in. Find the most common themes and expand on those.

Desktop vs. app. Given that users are clearly using phones less, make sure your website looks good on a desktop. Sites that contain an overabundance of white space or a layout that is broken up should get a fresh look. Menus and navigation are also an important consideration. Unless you need to utilize location services or push notifications on mobile devices, there is not an urgent need to put effort into developing or supporting an app at this time.

Digital applications. Supply your customers with either downloadable fillable pdfs or website forms for your system's applications. Make sure to include easy-to-understand instructions about how to complete the application and where to send when finished. A good example for utilities might be applications to start or stop service.

Digital Signatures. Along with those digital applications, if your document requires a signature, you can take advantage of digital signature services, which take your pdf document and allow for signing without downloading, physical signing, then rescanning. Example providers include Eversign, HelloSign, signNow, SignRequest, DocuSign, Formstack, AdobeSign, SignEasy, PandaDoc, pdfFiller, DocVerify and more. Some vendors have free tiers for entry level, and some are offering limited free use during the pandemic.

Archives and backups. Access to documents and files using cloud file storage allow you and your staff to view and edit collaboratively. In addition to anywhere-access, using cloud storage is a smart plan for storing and backing up files. Depending on your needs, you might be able to use free or low-cost options, or you might need to purchase services that can protect and secure your data. If you have not already implemented cloud storage, now is a good time.

VOIP and phone systems. With employees possibly distributed or working from home, having a phone system that accommodates transferring calls among staff becomes a higher priority for some. There are many options available, depending on your needs.

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advance to take some sort of action by looking toward better options, then steering away from the obstacle. If they decide early, the amount of change in their steering necessary to avoid catastrophe is minimal, perhaps just a few degrees right or left of their current plan.

Likewise, in this challenging climate, the best approach for water systems and small cities includes deciding early and making changes sparingly. Deciding which processes should remain the same and those that should change requires taking time to look closely at the way you conduct business. With minimal staff already taxed with a heavy workload, it is important not to throw out the baby with the bathwater, so to speak. Instead, use the current situation as an opportunity to assess, then make only the most impactful changes for the better. Check out the listing of those changes in the sidebar.

Overall, the only thing that stays the same is that things change. Yet during this time of great external shifts, especially in technology, be conscious about your processes and plan improvements that will make the most impact for you and your customers. Use change sparingly, and spare yourself some change.

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content management systems, and other small business solutions.

