Where's the life we lost in IT?

S. Berner
sberner@ecognus.com

A few years ago, as a postgraduate student and a KM consultant, I made continual fun of my less-than-enthusiastic colleagues and clients who just did not feel as excited about the potentials of information technologies as I, in my almost proselytizing zest, did. To me, life then would have been impossible without the Internet, the network, the humming of my laser printer(s), the ever faster USB connections to my scanner and all the other gadgets, both hard and soft, that I so zealously accommodated in the years of my IT-hooked middle age.

From a dot-matrix to an ink jet to a laser, my photos looked better than ever. Photoshop helped where age shook the hand, and the endless buttons on the brand new Pentax digital camera ensured that any mistakes my slightly befuddled post-stroke brain made were duly corrected. The camcorder permitted me to indulge in the fantasy of home-made Spielberg – one and only one cable and large RAM and you have a whole video suite on your laptop for less than 200 US$. Oh what bliss! Shall we mention all the recording equipment that I spent money on, to indulge in the nostalgia of saving second-hand LPs, often bought at Sunday markets and garage sales, from total oblivion by converting them into MP3 and recording them on CDs for posterity? There were a few hundred dollars involved in that, too, and no one is sure whether my newly born grand-daughter will want to listen to these 1920s nostalgias. I am sure, though, that the good old canine perched on His Master's Voice records would not feel as comfortable trying to squeeze onto the CD. And just as I thought I was oh so cool, my youngest sister arrives for a mid-semester break with a mobile that does everything – including, probably, making a cup of coffee. It immediately made me feel redundant, promising to send photos by e-mail or CD ('Don't you have infrared, Sam? I'll just upload them on my mobile.')

I have to admit, however, that this techno-euphoria is beginning to wane. Over the past six months something new is beginning to happen. I still carry my mobile around everywhere, but I switch it off more often than not, and only check messages at the end of the day. I am still e-mail obsessed, but if it were not the nature of my 24x7 work, I probably would not be doing it that way. At this point in my career it seems to be a knee-jerk reaction – sit, click, check, read, respond. It does nothing to endear Outlook to me; I feel like an automaton. I still take heaps of photographs, but I am switching my digital camera to manual and going through the same old motions I used to with my first ever Russian Leica. I feel that the lack of worry about the film running out and the cost of having it developed has led to my just 'shooting' unthinkingly and that the discipline so important for a good photographer has somehow evaporated.

The biggest difference, however, is occurring in the area of writing, which is what I do these days for a living. Over the past three years – ever since I went back to translating full-time – I would look at my translation and cringe. It was correct. It was equivalent (drastically so). Community members would say that it was eminently readable. I kept getting more and more work, so I assume the agencies and their clients were satisfied. I was not. My language was dead. Like a corpse floating on muddy water, it had but a semblance of what is used to be.

One afternoon a month or so ago, I hit upon a crazy idea. I took out a notepad (me, of the paperless office fame), pens, pencils, an eraser, my dictionaries and a book I randomly selected from the shelves. I left my laptop, with its computer assisted translation (CAT) tools, my translation memory (TM) and my nifty electronic dictionaries and glossaries behind. I unplugged the Internet connection, disconnecting myself from my communities of practice (CoP) and Kudoz Boards where I could logon, type in and have half the world's linguists answer my query in minutes. Like a monk from some medieval monastery, it was the text and me. The tools were in my head, not on my laptop. I was the tool. I was the information creator, processor, manager, storage facility – the lot.

Within an hour I had produced five pages in an elegant language, as smooth and as concise as my Arabic has always been. And it has not been a painful process at all – I sweat far more over a brochure about occupational health and safety than over the sociological introduction to mixed religion marriages that I was working on. Where was the difference then? I was not using my word processor. Because handwriting, especially the Arabic script, is an act of aesthetics, I needed to concentrate on what I was doing. I wrote first in pencil, then inked it. As I inked, I re-read the sentences and changed them. With word-processing, in ugly Arial or Times Roman, I glance at the text, check for spelling and send it off to the client. No art involved, no art produced. Isn't that a bit like the GIGO principle?

There are those who strongly and unequivocally stress that IT actually (1) needs creative people to make it and run it, and (2) promotes creativity as such. For me, unfortunately, software and PCs did not enhance what I already possessed. On the contrary, they seem to have detracted. And in the way they took away from me tasks to which I had to pay attention, they disenfranchised me. My attention span is now shorter, not longer. My attention to detail is almost all but obliterated. The spellchecker makes me a careless writer. And there is no romance in reading an old manuscript from the LCD screen – after all, where is the musty smell of old paper on the molding pages? Why should I bother practicing my drawing if I can have any kind of artwork, from oil on canvass to coloured pencil sketches, with one click on Photoshop? They are called 'filters', those little nifty instructions. I wonder how many other such 'filters' has the computerization of our world embedded in our heads? I remember not that long ago being able to declaim my favourite poets by heart. Not any more – now I do not have to go through bookshelves groaning with heavy volumes. All there is to the trick is to remember the title of the poem, or the first line, or the poet's name, Google it and voilà, here we are. If this is happening to a person with 35 years of 'pre-computerized' education where learning by rote was a large segment of what one did as a student, what kind of a memory, if any, will the 'post-computerized' generation have?

'Oh, but computers make life so much easier and faster', is the response. In a way they do, and I have no intention of embracing Luddism full scale and denying the vital role computerization plays in our lives. But please tell me, how often does any one of us pick up a pen and then write down on a piece of paper something we did not fully intend to? Or write it in the wrong spot on the paper? Or in the wrong language? Every time I switch between translating (which I do in Arabic) to respond to an urgent e-mail (which is done in English) I usually have the first line in garbled lingo. Since I use the same Latin-lettered keyboard for both Arabic and English, I often forget to do the Alt+Shift trick before typing. And how often do I press Alt+Tab instead? Enough times to drive the time-starved self insane with frustration, I assure you. How often would I do that with pen and paper? My mind has no need for Alt or Tab keys and writing is much less time consuming than keying in, especially if one has a keyboard in one script and types in another.

A friend of mine, a solicitor, has spent the last ten years being compu-savvy. A few months ago, disaster struck. Sent to a tiny Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory of Australia, he found himself computer-less. Everything, from forms to submissions to taking

down statements needed to be done by hand. They have no court clerks up there, the only access is by plane and the court itself is a police station where the court shows up every fortnight or so. 'I no longer know how to write', my friend wailed. 'I make spelling mistakes and my handwriting is illegible. And I get cramps after 15 minutes of holding a pen.' I feel no pity, somehow, because by embracing technology so zealously we have abrogated our right to control our most precious activity, word-smithing. And without word-smithing, we amount to little in this information-crazy, brave, new world of today.

About the author
Sam Berner (B.Ed., Dipl. LIS, Postgraduate Diploma in Information Management) is a principal of the company ECognus (Brisbane, Australia). She is a knowledge management consultant, assisting small to medium enterprises to benefit the most from their intellectual assets. ECognus also provides services in the area of tailored software applications and the digitization of business processes.

Disclaimer