

Bob

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Behn's Performance Leadership Report

An occasional (and maybe even insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities for improving performance and producing real results in public agencies.



"What were they thinking?"
Vol. 13, No. 2, October 2016

On why, even when using the latest technology,

Human Judgment is Actually Required

On October 5, 1960, the United States almost went to war with the Soviet Union.

In the previous spring, the U.S. had begun installing its Ballistic Missile Early Warning System in Thule, Greenland. The purpose of BMEWS was to warn the U.S. of a Soviet missile attack. And by early autumn, the Thule facility was operational.

Just in time! For on October 5, Thule's radar reported that dozens of missiles, apparently launched from Siberia, were headed towards North America. NORAD headquarters in Colorado was immediately notified, where, above a map of the globe, a number flashed, indicating the level of the threat. It started at "1," the lowest threat but soon advanced to "2," then "3," next "4," and finally "5"—the maximum threat level, which meant there was a 99.9% chance that the U.S. was being attacked.

Within minutes, the Air Force had to make a decision.

Fortunately, NORAD's vice commander, the highest ranking officer at headquarters, asked a useful question: "Where's Khrushchev?" The question was easy to answer. He was at the United Nations in New York. It didn't seem likely that U.S.S.R. would attack the U.S. while the first secretary of its Communist Party was, himself, in the country.

Still, the radar signals could not be dismissed. NORAD had to notify the President. First, however, headquarters had to talk directly with Thule. And when NORAD's call went through to a captain there, he requested a chance to check for a technical malfunction. He soon concluded that the signals being picked up by the radar came not from an armada of missiles.

The radar's signals were bouncing off the moon.

You may not have known this, but you should be personally very happy that a real, intelligent human realized that the computer's program was deficient. It lacked the ability to track

the location of the moon.

Today, of course, we humans believe whatever our computers tell us. We trust the computer in our dashboard or our smart phone to give us directions. Often this is helpful. Sometimes it can be dangerous.

When one woman's GPS told her to turn right onto a train track, she obeyed. But her van became stuck on the tracks. She and her two children barely escaped before a commuter train demolished her van.

Albert and Rita Chretien weren't so lucky. Driving from British Columbia to Las Vegas, they decided to take a scenic route. But they couldn't find a road back to I-93. So they asked their GPS for advice. It recommended a dirt road, which the couple took. The road, however, was headed towards some snow-topped mountains. And, as day turned to night, the Chretiens couldn't see where they were headed.

We humans seem to trust our computers more than we trust our own brains. Yet, whenever a computer gives us an instruction we ought to ask ourselves: "Does this make sense?" Often it will. Sometimes, however, the instruction could prove fatal.

It was "a pretty good road," the local sheriff observed, that "slowly goes bad." Rita survived. Albert did not.

This all-too-common behavior now has a nickname: "Death by GPS."

And isn't just clueless tourists who blindly follow their GPS devices. In Vermont, professional truck drivers do it all too frequently. At both ends of the scenic—but narrow and winding—Notch Road, is a sign: "Tractor Trailers Prohibited." Truckers ignore the warning. They obey their GPS.

Then, once a month, one of them gets stuck, requiring the Vermont Agency of Transportation to close the highway, while it removes the offend-

ing truck or tour bus.

Stanislas Dehaene, a French mathematician who shifted to neuroscience, observed in his book *The Number Sense*: "In domains in which the computer excels—the faultless execution of a long series of logical steps—our brain turns out to be slow and fallible. Conversely, in domains in which computer science meets its most serious challenges—shape recognition and attribution of meaning—our brain shines by its extraordinary speed."

We do not, however, always appreciate the difference. Sometimes, our unthinking reliance on technology is dumb and fatal. Other times, it is merely amusing.

Years ago, when your daily newspaper printed its first edition, someone proofed it for the inevitable typos. With financial constraints, however, newspapers appear to have eliminated this step. How do I know? Because *The Boston Globe's* hyphenation software makes numerous mistakes: My favorites include: "microf-racture," "Cooper-stown," "Tri-pAdvisor," "1-egislation," "casel-oad" and "iP-hone." *The Globe* even hyphenated a one-syllable word: Fly-nn.

Indeed, the problem seems to plague every newspaper. Here's one from *The New York Times*: "post-tracial." *The Economist* had two on one page: "star-tup" and "Skille-dUp."

Word-processing software always comes with a dictionary that can be updated whenever a word is added or an error is discovered. So why did my local paper twice hyphenate the nickname of the University of Massachusetts as "UM-ass"? **B**

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