

Bob

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.



On why all public executives need to repeatedly ask their teckies:

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Can Real Humans Make the Technology Work?

Although it was dark and rainy, and although I had not used this parking lot in a while, I immediately recognized that something was different: The parking meters were gone.

Instead, a sign told me to note my space number and go to the kiosk to pay. Good news: Above the kiosk were two street lights. Bad news: Neither street light was working. I went back to my car to get a flashlight and returned to the kiosk. Even then, it wasn't easy to read the screen.

Still, I entered my space number and began to insert my quarters. The lot had a two-hour parking limit, and I expected my meeting would last this long. After inserting several quarters, the kiosk refused to accept any more. I couldn't figure out why it jammed. Eventually, I decided, this must be because I didn't have to pay to park after 8:00 p.m. So I stopped trying.

Now what? Most of the parking kiosks that I have used then print a receipt, which you are obliged to put on your dashboard. This "pay and display" system permits a "parking enforcement officer" to determine whether or not your time has expired.

This kiosk, however, said "No Receipt Issued." So what should I do? I put my flashlight back in the car and went to my meeting.

When I returned—you know where this story is going—I had a parking ticket. I dutifully sent in my \$30 fine. I noted, however, (a) that I tried to pay, (b) that I could not have even tried if I had not carried a headlamp, and (c) that because the kiosk did not issue receipts there is no way I could prove that I had paid. No response (though my check was cashed).

Of course, contemporary parking kiosks, which have replaced old fashioned parking meters, have a number of advantages. For the parkers, they eliminate the need to carry quarters (a responsibility that I long ago delegated to my ash tray). All parking kiosks take credit cards (though some parking meters do too).

For the municipality, there are also advantages. They can increase revenues. No driver can use another's unexpired minutes. And some systems can be programmed to charge higher rates during times of peak demand. These days every municipality is trying to squeeze additional revenues from every source (though the initial capital costs are not trivial). **The town of Palm Beach, Florida expects to net \$370,000 per year by installing parking kiosks.**

Still, parking meters also have an advantage: Put in a quarter, and it shows you how long you can park. Put in another quarter, it shows your new limit. Nothing fancy. All parking meters work the same. No municipality needs an instructional YouTube video for parking meters (though videos are available for kiosks in: **Philadelphia; Atlantic City, New Jersey; and Lowell, Massachusetts.**

O'Hare's "design criterion" for the technology for projecting slides and videos in all classrooms:

"Any instructor must be able effortlessly, on the first try, to command the technology of the room in complete detail, upon entering it for the first time."

Of course, once you have used your community's kiosk several times, you have mastered the system. **But a visitor may not find the screen's instructions so easy to follow.**

For parking kiosks, however, a quick search on the Web suggests that there exist a wide variety of different models. **Metric Group of Mount Laurel, New Jersey just introduced its Elite Multi-Space meter. LKS Co. in Hong Kong makes nine different kinds of parking kiosks. Shenzhen Juumei Investment Co, Ltd. from Guangong, China has five.**

After all, unlike your laptop or iPad, a parking kiosk has just one

function. Lots of firms ought to be able to produce one. Still, the not-so-fancy technology of the parking kiosk does not always work as advertised. In Cincinnati, parkers had multiple complaints: Coins jammed. Credit cards weren't read. An entire (\$8,000) kiosk just didn't work. **In January, the city abandoned its parking meters.** (Apparently, however, Cincinnati's street lights work fine.)

Michael O'Hare of the University of California's Goldman School of Public Policy thinks about the design of everything, including classrooms. And for the technology in today's classroom to project slides and videos, O'Hare has a clear "design criterion" that he calls "quite straightforward, but very demanding and not subject to compromise or amendment:

Any instructor must be able effortlessly, on the first try, to command the technology of the room in complete detail, upon entering it for the first time."

Shouldn't the same criterion apply to every parking kiosk? Shouldn't it apply to every technology that government employs to interact with citizens? Shouldn't real humans be able to make the technology work?

They won't, unless public executives are willing to impose the O'Hare Design Criterion on their teckies.

On a sunny day, I returned to the parking lot. As I watched, every "patron" squinted at the sun-lit screen trying to follow the instructions. Several asked the parking enforcement officer for help. But she soon resumed her appointed rounds. After all, there were many cars to ticket, and the costs of the kiosks to cover. **B**

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