King County Office of Emergency Management Podcasts
Disasters: Are you ready?

Using Technology to Further the Mission of Emergency Management

I still think that relationships are the key to success. Relationships between first people, and then organizations, disciplines and jurisdictions.

But, I have to tell you that I do believe in using technology in all its forms to help us emergency managers to be more effective before, during and after disasters.

I don't consider myself a techie by any sense of the imagination. I'm a user, an adapter, and a promoter, but not a developer and certainly not an expert. I'm still trying to learn how to use a new digital camera we got for Christmas.

To show you how far we've come in just 12 years, in 1995 the State of Washington was providing computers to local emergency managers in Eastern Washington who didn't have any.

There is now so much technology the question becomes what do you chose to implement and what can you afford. For me it started with a pager, then a cell phone. About seven years ago I added a PDA (which happened to be a Palm), graduated to an HP Pocket PC, and now have a Blackberry. The cell phone and PDA have been combined and come equipped with a blue tooth capability.

The internet is now invading every aspect of our lives. For emergency managers we can order our first round of pizza via email, and also track incident status and obtain situational awareness using a variety of information management software. You can choose between WebEOC, E-Team, EM2000 and others. Which one are you using and how effective is it?

Geographical Information Systems (GIS) are finally getting close to be user friendly and even citizens and businesses can access the

power of GIS by using simplistic programs being made available by their local governments.

Recently using Homeland Security grants we have added video teleconferencing capabilities, secure landline phones, satellite phones and a video downlink that can provide real-time video from law enforcement aircraft to Emergency Operations Centers (EOC) and Incident Commanders operating from remote command posts.

As our expanded use of technology has increased, so has our reliance. It is important to remember that sometimes a Thomas Brothers map, hanging on a wall in your EOC and a grease pencil can still be your best friend.

I'm sure that newer technologies are only just around the corner. How much longer will I continue to carry a pager? How long will it be until we can track in real-time the deployment of police cars and fire apparatus a inventory the status of hospitals and shelters without ever having to call them on the phone.

Lastly, where will the techno geeks come from who will operate and maintain all this equipment for us? Or, will the emergency manager of the future be part human and part computer chip. If that happens I guess the transition to technology will have become complete and we'll all be obsolete—that is until relationships come into play, and since we all know PC's don't like Macs and vice a versa. Humans will have to take over mediate and come up with a regional solution!