BY ADRIAN SEGAR

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EVENT TECHNOLOGY:
DON'T RE-INVENT THE WHEEL

Meeting professionals are focusing too much on new event technologies, and ignoring existing methods that will improve events—at a fraction of the cost.

REMEMBER THE 1970S TELEVISION SERIES *The Six Million Dollar Man*? It featured a former astronaut whose limbs and eye were replaced with bionic implants, allowing him to perform super-human feats. The show's opening catch phrase "We can rebuild him…we have the technology" highlights our fascination with improving our lives via better gadgets and software.

Today's event professionals aren't immune from the allure of new technology. Industry conferences incorporate the latest and greatest mobile and gamification apps, video-streaming platforms, attendee tracking systems, audience response systems, mobile networking and registrant analytics. Suppliers are happy to sponsor these events, using them to showcase their wares and, hopefully, convince participants that their new technology is worth buying.

Few of us regret the passing of Rolodexes, paper-based registration systems, slide carousels, event professional binders and other relics of the past. Unfortunately, these days, too much of event professionals' limited continuing-education time is spent investigating shiny new toys and apps while overlooking free or inexpensive, proven methods of providing effective learning, connection, engagement and community building at their events.

It's understandable why this happens. As computer scientist Alan Kay once quipped: "Technology is anything that was invented after you were born." Given that technology in the form of human tools has existed for more than three million years, this mindset relegates what we view as technology to a tiny sliver of what actually exists. Today we are surrounded by so much rapidly changing technology that we fixate on what is new, and what was new quickly becomes taken for granted and largely invisible.

"Technology sinks below our consciousness like the eye blinks our brain filters out," says technologist David Weinberger.

Finally, and perhaps most important, our widely held view of what is and isn't "technology" is far too narrow. We tend to think of technology in terms of products and embedded implementations (e.g. software). But this is an incredibly restrictive viewpoint. Kevin Kelly, in his thought-provoking book *What Technology Wants*, redefines technology broadly as can be seen in the following description of three of the most important human technologies.

- **Language**: A technology that "shifted the burden of evolution in humans away from genetic inheritance…[allowing] our language and culture to carry our species' aggregate learning as well."
- **Writing**: A technology that "changed the speed of learning in humans by

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- Why do we open conferences with a keynote?
- Why do so few people speak during most conference sessions?
- Are presentations the best way for people to learn?
- How do we know if the sessions we're providing are what participants actually want?
- Why do so many participants report that the best learning occurs in the hallways?
- Is it a good idea to provide entertainment during socials?
- Are socials the best way to meet interesting participants?
- Why do we close conferences with a keynote or meal?

We must seriously investigate critical issues like these, instead of simply repeating meetings the same "safe" way they've always been done. An increasing number of meeting professionals and clients are rediscovering and implementing human process technologies, both at the meeting and session format level, that fundamentally improve their events in ways that a new device or app cannot. As the popularity of these approaches and techniques grows, those who ignore them are jeopardizing the future relevance and ultimate survival of their events.

Every event professional should reframe event technology to include the process used during events. We need to concentrate less on improving logistical elements: registration, decor, audiovisual, food and beverage and so on. These are secondary processes, and though they're important, we know how to do them well. Instead, focus on improving the human process you use throughout the event venue: how you structure and script its flow, how you maximize useful connection between attendees, how the content and form of sessions are determined so as to best achieve desired outcomes. This is the event technology that counts. ■

easing the transmission of ideas across territories and across time."
- **Science**: "The invention that enables greater invention."

Once we start thinking about technology with a wider lens like this, all kinds of possibilities arise.

Language, writing and science are outside our conventional, narrow-scope definition of technology. The specific technology implementations needed to express the sounds and symbols that they use—audiovisual systems, pen and paper, Google Drive, etc.—are secondary. Language, writing and science are primarily about human process.

Social media theorist Clay Shirky says, "Revolution doesn't happen when society adopts new technologies—it happens when society adopts new behaviors." When we expand our perspective on event technology to include behavioral process, many unexamined aspects of our events come into view.