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The Absence of Presence

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Vendors assure us that presence will only intrude when and for whom we want it to. But it's an issue of discipline, not technology.

I've covered a lot of trade shows in my time, but this weeks VON conference in Boston was the first time I took along a Wi-Fi-equipped laptop. It changed the whole texture of the experience. No longer a mere word processor and morning e-mail checker, my laptop became a real-time communications tool, carrying the "presence" of my workgroup and social network.

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Consumer VOIP (voice over IP) services such as Vonage and Skype use presence-informed buddy-list interfaces in their downloadable clients, letting users "see" and "dial" buddies with a click. "Istanbul," Microsofts latest version of its enterprise Windows Messenger client, announced at VON, will similarly let business users ramp up from text chat to voice with a click, although their buddy lists in this case may be limited to the enterprise directory.

Click here to read more about Istanbul.

Even limited to chat, however (by shared Wi-Fi bandwidth and my good attendee manners), the presence-informed AIM client in my laptop became a working example of much of the buzz about converged communications. As such, its platform was now worth its considerable weight through the long, high-mileage trade-show day.

Laptop in lap, I could take notes without taking my eyes from the speaker. Other times I sat in one presentation while finishing up a story based on interviews conducted earlier that day. After e-mailing it to my editors, I could later see it live on our Web site. I soon found myself looking for end-of-row seats in the packed conference halls so I could plug into wall sockets instead of wasting battery power. And I had lots of company. At the end of every few rows, AC adapters snaked across the floor.

I was amazed to find wireless networks not only in the Hynes Convention Center, but everywhere I sat down in Boston. In restaurants, hotel bars, in front of the lobby TV playing the American League playoffs, people all over Boston were multitasking, cheering the Red Sox and typing away. Were they sharing the experience with the folks on their buddy lists? Or were they also working? If they were like me, probably a little of both.

In the shows press room, where traditionally large banks of PCs provided reporters links back to the office or to e-mail, there were two measly computers. Nowadays, most writers covering geeky trade shows pack their own Internet heat. The press-room PCs were almost gone, just as pay phones have nearly vanished with the universal adoption of cell phones. Some writers still took notes on pads, but just as many typed notes right into their laptops. In fact, except for interview space, who needed a press room at all? I sat in one workshop, fact-checked a story with a few Google searches and filed it via e-mail, all from my seat.

I felt as if I had taken everyone with me on my trip. I could answer my copy editors queries as she edited my piece in her San Francisco office. I could weigh different story options with my boss in Baltimore. I could e-mail back and forth the pros and cons of a friends recent job offer. I could share a laugh with an ex-colleague. But the flip side of "presence" was absence. Distracted with my chats and e-mails, I was absent from much of the presentation.

At trade shows, and right now at a Logan Airport gate, I am surrounded by people not really being where they are. They are camped in a mental tent with

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invisible fellow campers, plugged into cell phone conversations and Web chats, their thoughts and activities entirely indifferent to their physical surroundings.

Are we ready for this? Are our kids ready for this? Vendors assure us that properly configured, "presence" will only intrude when and for whom we want it to. But its an issue of discipline, not technology. If a speech hits the tiniest lull, and your chat window is there to be opened, who can resist the temptation to pass a note in the mother of all classrooms?

And if were not really present where we are, what chance encounters can we have with strangers on a train, with other people waiting for an airplane? What sights, conversations, and observations will we miss? As I may be missing now, after my trade show trip, typing away the time until my delayed flight begins to board. Here comes a cute little boy and his mother. I look up from my laptop. Hell be a handful to keep occupied, I think. But look, his mom has brought a portable DVD player and headphones. He sits right down. I guess hell be ready.

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VOIP/Telecom Topic Center Editor Ellen Muraskin has been observing and illuminating the murky intersection of computer intelligence and telephony since 1993. She reaches for her VOIP line when the rain makes her POTS line buzz.

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