



# Your Work is a Mission-Critical System

---

Barry K. Zweibel

*originally published in The Ticker magazine in February 2001*

Considering your work as a mission-critical system is not as counterintuitive as it may first appear. End-users, after all, have long expected you to perform as capably as the very technologies you provide for them - if not more so. So maybe they're on to something.

Consider:

- **You as a network.** You have multiple paths (read: industry contacts) to insure that projects and programs get from start to finish sooner rather than later. And, when problems arise, you easily shift your attention at native-LAN speeds. And your thick skin? Hey, it's your SONET-based, self-healing architecture!
- **You as a PBX.** You are extraordinarily reliable and routinely process highly technical instructions with a consistency that belies the underlying complexity of it all.
- **You as a beeper, or cell phone, or two-way wireless messaging device.** Your voice mail greeting no doubt boasts your availability - 24x7, anytime, anywhere - at the push of a button or two. No downtime here.

Certainly, there are other examples of varying seriousness and fun. But what if we took this systems notion and retooled it a bit? What would it look like if what you did each day really was a mission critical system?

You'd probably start thinking about how telecommunications professionals are routinely pushed to the limit. Perhaps the word "relentless" would come to mind. And you very well might start to consider how IT folk intensify their own frenzy through all sorts of unnecessary and/or counter-productive activities. It's as if they've created their own version of a personal system overload.

**So here's the question: if they have, how do you know that you haven't too?**

Well, following our analogy, some fundamental systems management techniques can help determine where you are on the continuum from calm to ticking-time-bomb and what to do about it.

- **Track key system metrics.** Start by spending two weeks noticing any symptoms you're displaying that are generally associated with stress and strain. Note, for example, your daily caffeine intake, the number of meals you miss or eat way-too late, how well (or poorly) you're sleeping at night, etc. Track how often you get totally aggravated each week (each hour?) and the number of times you find yourself racing around out of sheer habit. Record your findings.
- **Continue to monitor the gauges.** With base-line statistics now in hand, continue to notice what alarms are going off for you. It's not necessary to try and solve or change anything yet. Just keep noticing - and tracking - your stress and strain symptoms. Look for trends and triggers – events that cause an increase or decrease in undesirable behaviors. Notice any patterns in your reactions to them.
- **Begin testing and evaluation.** Slowly at first, begin to modify your daily routines. As an example, remove your Nextel battery, turn off your beeper, call forward your phone, exit Outlook and (phew!) try sitting silently for 10 minutes. Leave the building for lunch and go for a walk. Take an earlier train home. Enroll in a class or seminar to get out of the office for a few days and learn some new skills. Choose to react differently. See how easy or difficult it is for you to relax - as in really relaxing. The goal here is for you to become more purposeful in HOW YOU THINK ABOUT what you think about. And then act accordingly. Keep tweaking different aspects of your routines to see what works and what doesn't. Don't worry, like troubleshooting, it often takes a series of steps to reach the desired end.
- **Operationalize the improvements.** Now consciously choose to implement some of the changes that worked particularly well for you. Make them daily priorities - as in real priorities! And remember to use your project management and cutover expertise to smooth out any anomalies that pop up along the way. Then, turn your attention to other related trends and analyses.

The big surprise for many who've gone through these steps has been to see just how much they were feeding their own bad habits, busyness and agitation. Sure, there are a variety of external forces to blame if you want to go there, but effective system managers typically prefer to focus on fixing problems rather than grousing about them.

And what's your intention?

---

*Barry K. Zweibel is a personal, career and business coach. In a former life, he was Vice President of Telecommunications for the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and Adjunct Instructor at Northwestern University, where he developed and taught, "Managing (the Human Side of) Mission Critical Systems." Phone: 847-291-9735; email: [info@gqci.com](mailto:info@gqci.com); web: [www.gqci.com](http://www.gqci.com).*