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## CAPITAL LIVING

### POLITECHS

#### **Ahead of the curve**

#### ***Members are blue without BlackBerrys***

By [Abraham Genauer](#)

Pens go with paper. Macaroni goes with cheese. Members of Congress go with BlackBerrys.

Since it was adopted as Congress's standard wireless handheld device two years ago, BlackBerrys have come to rival even cell phones for ubiquity in the halls of Congress. Both members and their staffs now rely on them for a large share of their out-of-office communications. While lobbyists and Wall Street types have since caught on to these and similar units, BlackBerrys represent a rare instance when the usually stodgy Congress was ahead of the technological curve.

Adoption of BlackBerrys was more by force than choice, however. The attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, highlighted the inadequacy of the then-existing wireless communications system. Cell phones became useless due to high call volumes; many members couldn't be reached fast enough with information about security and evacuation procedures.

So enter the BlackBerry. Rep. Rob Ney (R-Ohio) was able to use his BlackBerry to contact his staff and family. In the aftermath of the attacks, Ney, who chairs the Committee on House Administration, had the committee order a device for each House member and pay for the service plan.

The choice to spend more than \$6 million on BlackBerrys struck some as odd, considering that they are made by a Canadian company, Ontario-based Research in Motion (RIM). Critics said the U.S. government should have patronized U.S.-based firms, such as Palm or Handspring.

The decision to go with BlackBerry came down to information security. According to RIM, the BlackBerry uses a triple data-encryption system that provides the utmost security for sharing sensitive information. For further security, third-party applications are used, such as LRW Digital's RemoteLock program, which is also utilized by the Senate. If a device is lost or stolen, the systems administrator can send a special e-mail message to lock the device until a password is entered.

Most members have found the BlackBerrys to be invaluable. However, the emergency communications system, the main reason for adopting the devices, made a poor showing in its first real-life test. The problems were exposed last month during the short-lived scare caused by two staffers' Halloween costumes and a plastic gun.

As House offices went into lockdown and SWAT teams searched for one or more gunmen, staffers were stuck getting updates by watching the local news. A message did eventually go out over the BlackBerry network, but only after almost an hour had passed since the incident became known.

Many members were livid over the failure, and a system overhaul came soon afterward. To streamline the notification process, Capital Police have instituted a "chief communicator" position, one person responsible for sending a prompt message via BlackBerry apprising members and staffers of the situation and giving instructions as necessary.

While official security communications were the main impetus for bringing the BlackBerry to Congress, many congressional offices report that the devices have increased productivity



PATRICK G. RYAN

*As a new member of Congress, Rep. Tim Ryan (D-Ohio), right, gets a quick BlackBerry lesson.*

too. Giving advice to new members in a column in The Hill a year ago, Rep. Ed Schrock (R-Va.) wrote that “having your BlackBerry handy will allow you to harass your staff by e-mail while you are waiting for votes to be held.”

As a vital communications tool, users find themselves nearly inseparable from their BlackBerrys. Rep. Dale Kildee (D-Mich.) told The Hill earlier this year, “If I happen to forget [my BlackBerry], I get a little apprehensive. I want to be accessible.” Because of their owners’ strong attachment to their BlackBerrys, the devices have come to be known to some as “crack berries.”

However, a compulsive e-mail-checking habit is a small price to pay for increased security and productivity. With everyone merrily typing messages on the thumb-operated keyboards, Washington truly has become business at the speed of thumbs.

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