

# COMMENT

## FROM THE EDITOR

**A**m I part of the solution? I sometimes lecture my children with a version of what my father used to tell me about campsites: Try to leave the world in a little bit better condition than it was in when you entered it. I have always longed to believe that this is a fundamental part of how I conduct my life, but events on That Tuesday Morning called it into question.

After pulling myself together to pick up the phone (difficult – my daughter attends a school a few blocks from the Financial District), I called a couple of the local fire departments and described my feeble résumé as an inexperienced volunteer firefighter and emergency medical technician in the town I recently moved from. I know my limits and did not dream of piling into my car with my turnout kit and driving down to Ground Zero. But I thought I might be of some use cleaning hoses or fetching water or standing by at the local firehouse while the experienced members went to do the real work. The local chiefs (probably wisely) said “Thanks, but no thanks.”

Despite some time invested to alter the fact, I know I am not a firefighter, I’m an ergonomist.

OK, I’m an ergonomist. As you can see from the articles in this issue, there are vital and pertinent questions to which human factors/ergonomics can provide answers and Make a Difference (that’s why I chose this field, after all). But my specialization rarely involves me in the design of things like emergency response or security systems; for the most part, I design e-business applications. Considering the awful events of the day, how am I really making the world any better?

**“I’m not a firefighter,  
I’m an ergonomist”**

It came to me when relating one of my favorite anecdotes for explaining our field to nonpractitioners. My dissertation advisor, Professor Alphonse Chapanis (the Godfather of Human Factors, as I like to say), once performed an elegant little study for Bell Labs (Chapanis, 1999). They were about to roll out the first push-button phones and were wondering if they should use the existing arrangement for telephone operators (two vertical columns of five buttons each). He tested several possible configurations and found a significant difference favoring the layout we’re all familiar with today.

“Well, I guess that’s interesting,” my unconvinced listener might say, while thinking, “So a person making a phone call might have a 1% reduced chance of dialing the wrong number and avoiding a minor annoyance, big deal.”

“Wait a minute, do the math,” I retort. How many phone calls do you think are placed daily around the world? A million? 10 million? Even at a 0.1% improvement, that’s 10,000 instances of a mild annoyance for both caller and receiver. Cumulatively, that one, small application of HF/E in design spared people around the world a *lot* of aggravation.

I’m pretty sure my two years riding as a volunteer didn’t save anyone’s life, but I am comforted to think that my own small efforts in the field I trained in just might, when you add it all up, make this world an infinitesimally better place to live in. OK, I’ll say it: I’m proud to even belong to the same profession as the guy who made that difference.

### Reference

Chapanis, A. (1999). *The Chapanis chronicles: 50 years of human factors research, education, and design*. Santa Barbara, CA: Aegean.

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