IS IT PLUGGED IN?

By Denise Lamb

On an Election Day, all over the country.....during the hour before the polls open.... the phones are ringing.
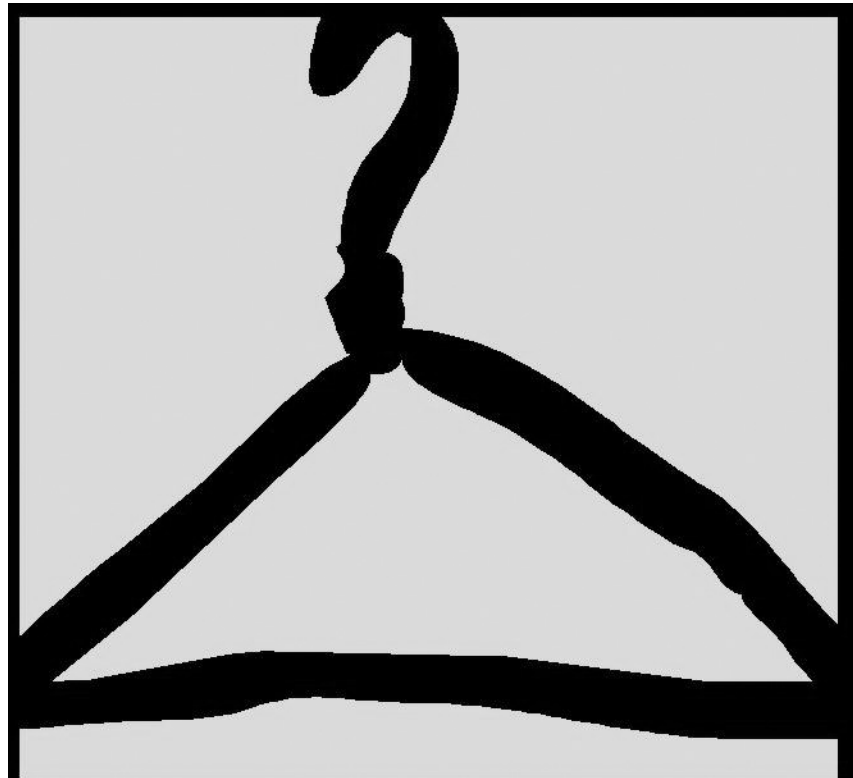
The first question that has to be asked by the voting system technicians is ..."Is it plugged in?
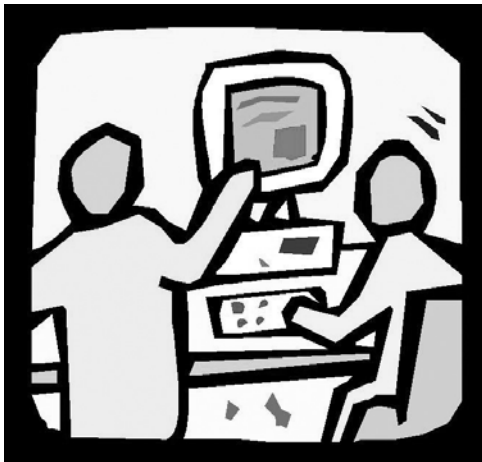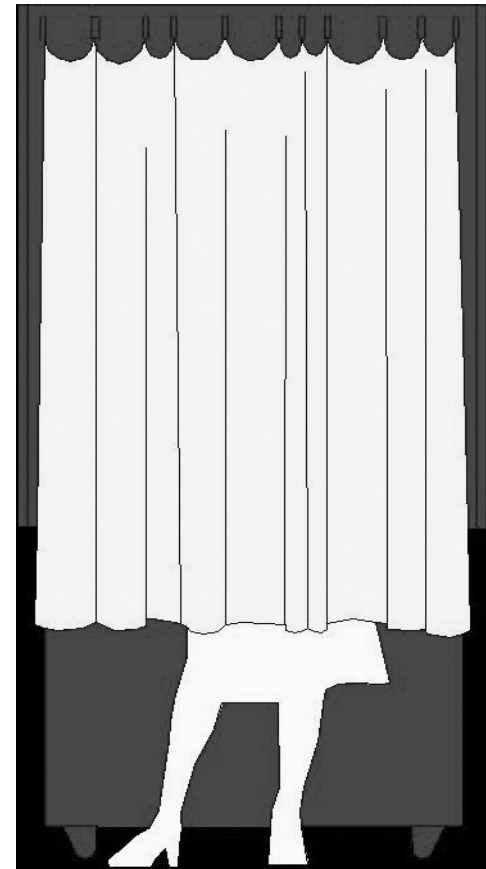
That question represents the usability issue at its most basic for election officials and technicians....because it demonstrates a basic skill level of one group of election day users – precinct boards.

Poll workers are recruited solely for administrative functions. They should not be expected to take on technical or mechanical duties. Mechanical devices on voting systems should not be repaired by frantic poll workers on election day.
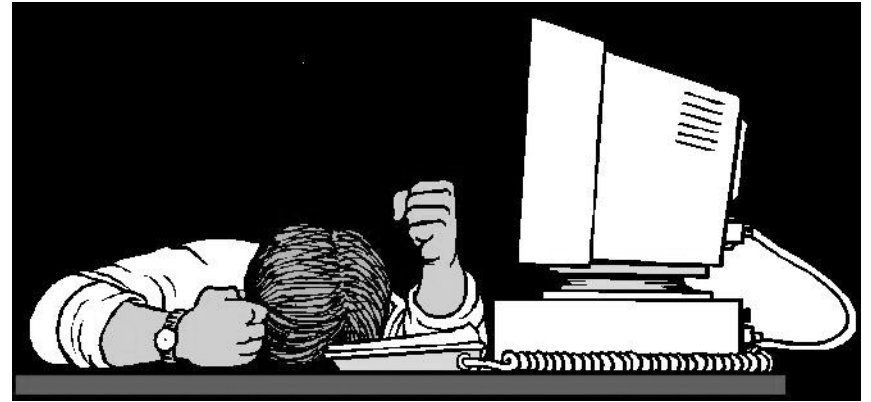
The usability issue, when addressed, has been aimed first at the voter, undeniably, a very important user – but not the <u>only</u> user of a voting system.

For the technician and the administrator, usability issues arise during pre-election and post-election activities.

Set-up and ballot configuration are critical to the success of the election. Errors in ballot configuration or programming, will cause election failure before the polls open.

And when errors are discovered, it is inevitably too late to successfully recover. This is one of the most high-risk areas of election administration.
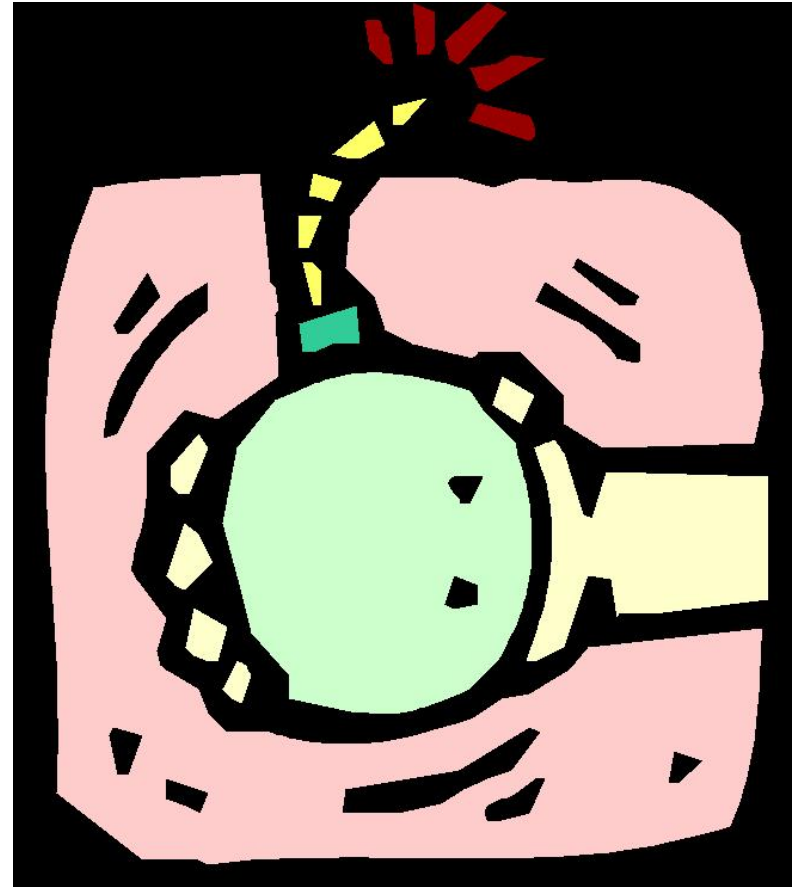
So, what approach should be taken in beginning to address usability in configuration issues? Can ballot configuration be intuitive?

What does that mean? Can software be intuitive if a user has not worked with similar software? Probably not.

Should we look at functionality and apply basic data processing principles?

Ballot definition that requires multiple data entry points for the same candidate will maximize probability of human error.

Likewise, during post-election activities, any system should allow users to perform a limited number of relatively simple tasks to retrieve results.

Post-election difficulties in retrieving election results will arouse suspicion and diminish public confidence in the electoral system

SUMMARY

- Ease of use for poll workers ie.. not too technical- try to limit use to administrative tasks- no mechanical or technical repairs.

- Ease of use for voters

- Ease of use for technicians and administration in pre-election functions.

- Minimal data entry for ballot configuration.

- Limited tasks to retrieve data post-election.