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A Shock to the System - Joined Up Electronic Government

Introduction

In April 2000 the UK Government published its e-government strategy setting out the timetables and responsibilities for implementing the objectives of the March 1999 Modernising Government White Paper. In response to the views of industry and others, HMG has advanced to 2005 the target for the on-line availability of all government services capable of electronic delivery to the citizen. This can only be achieved by building on the best of private sector achievements and learning from success (and failure) elsewhere in the world. The means used must be those that best meet citizens' needs and join up communities, as targeted in the "National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal" consultation paper from the Social Exclusion Unit of the Cabinet Office in May 2000.

The earlier White Paper stated that "The Government must bring about a fundamental change in the way we use IT". The principal obstacle is widely seen to be the lack of leadership to bring about a change in public sector thinking and attitudes. The incentive is huge savings in administrative costs, even if on-line communications are in parallel with existing methods. Another driver is the political imperative to provide better communications between individuals, business and government. However, a pre-condition for success is that those in the public sector who are to be retrained and reorganised are enthusiastic and believe the changes will indeed improve the service provided to the citizen. Moreover, improving services in areas where demand is infinite does not cut costs.

Recommendations

1. "Silo" mentalities and rivalries must be overcome, using departmental e-government strategies as a catalyst. This will require collective leadership, particularly from the Information Age government champions and permanent secretaries, not just the e-envoy.
2. Inter-departmental task groups to address policy objectives should be a mainstream way of addressing needs, not an exception. Career structures and training facilities need to encourage, facilitate and reward cross-departmental working.
3. Government must be joined-up from the perspective of the citizen with a choice of "user friendly" interfaces (including the option of personal contact) which put them at the centre. There should be no "wrong portal"; all channels likely to be used by the citizen should cross-refer.
4. The Office of Government Commerce should ensure that procurement processes encourage the integration of strategies across shared infrastructures at the same time as securing value for money in meeting objectives.
5. Open industry standards should be used for all new systems (especially for smart card applications and interfaces between departmental systems) both to avoid fragmentation and to facilitate future partnership and information sharing.
6. The Data Protection Commissioner should be given the role of policing the sharing of personal information between departments and applications. The penalties for abuse need review alongside the responsibilities of those with access.
7. HMG should identify and replicate the successes of other governments and learn from the private sector, especially in the effective thorough implementation and continued monitoring of improved service levels.

Why is progress so difficult?

Electronic delivery of Government services to the citizen and business is still in its infancy, sometimes stalled by the feeling that a service should not be offered unless and until all can have access. There is a danger that the quest for social inclusion will create social stagnation. Only a proportion of citizens, given choice, will wish to go on-line. Other channels of communicating with government must be kept in place. Even so, considerable cost savings are available - particularly if analysis counts the savings to the citizen as well as those for government.

Much of the saving inside government will stem from the integration needed to achieve joined-up government. The principal benefit is likely to be a much better level of service within cash constraints. Merely transferring the cost of electronic access to the citizen would fuel a political backlash akin to that currently hitting call-centres, Internet banking and other poorly designed or implemented e-commerce.

Some Local Authorities are making headway with "one-stop" electronic services to their citizens. The best of these include cross-sector links with the local business and voluntary communities and some have links with central government - who could learn much from these successful cross cutting schemes. All tiers of government need to be involved in any single interface and not rely on citizens knowing for any particular issue who to contact at what level of

government.

There are increasingly calls for a deep-rooted cultural change within government. The lead being taken by the Secretary to the Cabinet to tackle inter-departmental rivalries is welcome, but change cannot occur overnight. The need is for investment in implementation and delivery by staff at all levels.

Within policy making, the influence of "silo mentalities" or "stovepipe thinking" is profound. (An example is statements from the DETR about car-sharing, which ignore DfEE's commitment to encourage flexible working.) Much greater co-operation is required throughout the public sector with a willingness, indeed an eagerness, to share ideas and experiences. This process can be accelerated by encouraging secondments into key posts of people who already think collaboratively and giving more civil servants the opportunity to work outside for a while. Secondments between local and central government officials would also be particularly beneficial.

Unless there is a far greater acceptance across government departments that change is welcome and not merely necessary, that it is an opportunity for improvement and not just a threat driven by technology enthusiasts and cost cutters, then success will be at best patchy and short-term.

Current Initiatives

There are successful initiatives around the country where both local and central government services are being delivered at a single contact point. Some of these can be accessed over the public Internet but most involve one or more physical "one-stop" shops (or kiosks). Examples include:

- Cambridge Childcare scheme: a virtual "welfare to work" scheme;
- Leeds City Council one-stop shop for information or help with benefits, welfare rights, council tax and adult training, etc.;
- Better Government For Older People programme: 28 UK-wide pilots, developing accessible, easy-to use IT for older people and sharing experiences via the Web

Government must move away from the idea that

its services can only be accessed from public sector facilities. For many people a local shop - often also the sub Post Office - is the only convenient alternative to a home visit: an ideal access point, with a helper on hand when needed. The closure of unprofitable bank branches in rural and depressed urban areas may mean that a one-stop-shop in every Post Office is the only realistic way of serving many of the socially excluded. For others, garage forecourts (especially those open "24 x 7") would be a practical location.

Such local ventures need to be designed to cut across current "silo" mentalities in terms of their administration, finance and human resources, as well as in the range of public and private sector services offered.

Putting Citizens at the Centre

“Joined-up” government and “electronic” government are not the same. The “e” is much easier but without the joining-up could make matters worse. Government recognises that access to its services should be available to the citizen at home, at work, at leisure, on the move or when sick. Work on creating and supporting the appropriate on-line access needs to be co-ordinated with the focus on putting the citizen/business at the centre. This includes permitting, and actually encouraging, multiple portals in addition to those provided by government.

In the short term, at least, many citizens will need to be persuaded of the benefits to them of dealing with government electronically. These must be readily apparent in terms of convenience, ease and cost.

One of the key features of Information Age technology is the ability to tailor the interface to the needs of those seeking access. The design of access screens determines the user’s ability to understand and willingness to respond. Displays must appear and inputs be accepted in the language of the user. Individuals also need to be guided through the system in ways that are meaningful to them. The London Borough of Newham claims to be the leading implementor of e-government joined up at the citizen. It is working in partnership with the business and voluntary sectors to make one of this country’s most deprived communities the first “wired city” in the UK.

It does not matter to most people which official department they deal with so long as their problem is solved or the facts they have to file are confirmed to them as being correctly logged. This need not affect the way the captured information is subsequently presented to and processed by the appropriate officials and the improvements that can be made as systems are integrated over time.

The concept of Customer Relationship Management is now a major priority in the private sector but does not appear to be a part of government thinking. Some local authorities are beginning to apply this concept to Call Centres and One-Stop shops but have been criticised for focusing on delivery and not considering the “relationship” aspect.

Statutory obstacles to the sharing of personal or business information between departments are often cited as a reason for lack of progress. EURIM has previously (Briefing No 12, July 1996) called for the Data Protection Commissioner to be given an enhanced role in respect of complaints regarding Government Departments. This should include the authority to police routines for data sharing, as part of a comprehensive review of legislation covering the varying duties and responsibilities of those who might have access to shared information. Such a review is necessary if the obstacles are to be removed while both respecting citizens’ rights to privacy and achieving efficiency in the handling of their personal information.

Use of Smart Cards

The Government acknowledged in its “Modernising Government” White Paper that smart cards, and in particular multi-application cards, will be a key technology for joined up government. Cards enable users to carry the identification data necessary to authenticate on-line access to high value or confidential electronic services. They are increasingly being used in the private sector (e.g. credit cards) and those without them will soon be at a serious disadvantage. EURIM, however, recognises that cultural factors mean that any UK smart card scheme will be voluntary.

Wider acceptance of a citizen smart card scheme may follow once its potential to promote social inclusion becomes evident, for example through the capability of the same card to be used as a season ticket, library ticket, health card or phone charge card. Supplying members of a community with a card offering wide ranging functionality will help include the many current

‘technology have-nots’ and can draw in the 3 million-plus adults without conventional bank accounts.

In April 2000 the Government published its framework policy and guidelines for smart card use in government. This appears to mandate the public sector and those delivering services on its behalf that they “must” take account of considerations of application, security, accessibility and ensuring widest possible uptake. It is unclear who centrally, if anybody, will actually enforce this. Such uncertainty is worrying.

The chips now embedded in smart cards commonly contain microprocessors as well as memory. There is real concern that we will end up with a proliferation of physically incompatible single-use smart cards. It is therefore important that HMG adopts open industry standards for any cards it issues, including any biometric identifiers, to enable the sharing of terminals,

networks and cards. The nature of debate over personal identification appears to have changed over the past year. EURIM will be producing a

briefing placing the issues in the context of social inclusion as well as of civil liberties.

Government to Business Interface

The problems of fragmented contact with citizens are replicated in those with business, whether as client or supplier. For example, employers wishing to help train and recruit staff from government assisted programmes may find themselves having to deal separately with DfEE, DCMS, DETR, Inland Revenue, DSS and DTI, as well as local agencies. The full list is said to be over 40 agencies/organisations for the average "assisted" area.

There is a risk that today's PFI/PPP contracts will be tomorrow's obstacle to joined-up government. Merely optimising parts of government under such contracts could perpetuate rather than help resolve this situation. This is one of the more difficult tasks for the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) to address.

Other challenges for the OGC include reversing a procurement culture with so little understanding of modern business practices that some leading ICT suppliers will no longer bid for

public business, while at the same time ensuring that small and/or new enterprises are not "squeezed out" by seemingly restrictive practices and inappropriate selection criteria.

The OGC is intended to integrate the departmental groups concerned with public procurement policy and practice and to contribute a significant proportion of the cost savings targeted by HMG. The overall remit is to deliver an enhanced service. Its role in implementing many of the recommendations of the Cabinet Office "Major IT Projects Review" will be critical. OGC needs to see that procurement processes not only serve departmental ICT strategies, but foster their integration across the whole of government, both central and local, as policies and technologies change over time.

However, the old teams have largely transferred to the OGC en bloc and there does not yet seem to have been a significant change of attitude.

Learning from Others

Finland has created the first national electronic identity card system, providing cardholders with secure access to private and public sector services that are available electronically. Cardholders can now officially register a change of address, apply for day-care services and access library and banking services from any location offering Internet access.

In Australia, rural offices can deliver government services through the Internet. One example is the State of Victoria portal for small firms services. In Canada, the provincial government of New Brunswick is managing its dealing with its citizens through a network of one-stop shops located in offices, kiosks, or accessible by telephone. Where previously personal data was

recorded in as many as 50 different places, and often inaccurately, now 16 departments and agencies operate through a single front office. The Manitoba State portal is another example of one stop access to a range of government services.

Arizona already has on-line voting. In California, on-line voter registration and validation have not only made it much easier to become politically involved but revealed that 15% of the electrical register was "dead wood".

But the problems of front-ending departmental silos with common portals - "putting lipstick on the face of a pig" - are common to governments around the world.

Conclusion

Progress demands leadership rather than mere exhortation. Whatever the supposed political commitment to implementing the vision set out in the 'Modernising Government' White Paper and later documents, there needs to be constant, high profile leadership from the heart of government to carry it through. The introduction of systems and process thinking to the heart of the Civil Service is as profound a change as the original Northcote-Trevelyan reforms and needs the drive of a designated cabinet level Minister.

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