

Book Review

Government ICT Strategy (March, 2011) Cabinet Office

Government ICT Strategy – Strategic Implementation Plan (2011) HM Government

Computing in UK public administration sometimes seems like a long running soap opera. From the travails of the Swansea vehicle licensing project in the early 1970s to the continuing problems in the NHS, the public image of government ICT is that of a litany of overspending, rampant scope creep and the occasional spectacular failure.

To give it its due, the Cabinet Office's 'Government ICT Strategy' published in 2011 is nothing if not upfront about the problem. "*Government information and communications technology (ICT)*" it declares in its opening sentence, "*has a really bad name*". It then goes on to complain that much of this is unjustified and to argue that the characterisation of the public sector as being excessively accident prone when it comes to ICT is more than a little unfair. The private sector has its failures too (remember the London Stock Exchange Taurus project?), but is better positioned to bury the evidence. Government ICT failures happen in the full glare of publicity, not just from the popular press, but from parliamentary committees, opposition MPs happy to score political points and House of Commons reports. It is not, therefore, surprising that every so often a new administration announces that this has to stop and declares a bright new dawn.

All government policy statements tend to have certain characteristics; characteristics which can be readily observed in the 2011 ICT strategy. There are the clichés ("*ICT is a fundamental tool that every modern state needs*"), the bromides (tighter spending controls, better governance, etc.) and the re-cycling of policies from previous strategies and pronouncements (more transparency, greater citizen engagement and so on). Occasionally, mixed in with this recital of political boilerplate, more substantial policies are to be found. In the latter department the 'Government ICT Strategy' and the accompanying 'Strategic Implementation Plan' do not disappoint containing between them a number of important and, were they to be implemented, potentially game changing measures. These fall into two categories: Damascene conversions and the genuinely radical. It is in these, rather than the usual guff, that the interest and importance of the strategy lie.

The Damascene conversions can be found in numerous statements throughout both documents which announce that the government intends to implement policies and practices which academics and many professionals have been advocating for years and in some cases decades. Examples of such include a commitment to standardisation, re-use of software, a shift from custom building to buying off-the-shelf and a move to open systems. What is remarkable about the many items on this list is not their revolutionary nature, but that in 2011 the government seemed to have only just discovered them. The concept of open systems first emerged over 30 years ago. Ideas about software re-use go back well before object oriented systems and class libraries were first mooted in the 1980s. And so on. So while it is encouraging to see that government now intends to adopt these ideas, one cannot help but wonder why it has taken so long to get around to it? A more cynical interpretation would be that they have not just discovered them of course. Governments are adept at recycling the same policies in new clothing and who knows, if they repeat them enough times, they might actually do something about them at some point.

The more interesting parts of the strategy are the more adventurous, not to say courageous, proposals. The strategy itself is made up of four components: reducing waste and failure, creating a common IT infrastructure, using ICT to enable and deliver changes and strengthening governance. As headings, these too can be classified as bromides, but within them there are several important and some quite radical ideas. Of these, the most important in political terms is the concept of “*digital by default*”. Perhaps the most significant statement in the entire strategy is on page 56 of the ‘Strategic Implementation Plan’ under Project 16, ‘Using ICT to Enable and Deliver Change’, where it is stated that:

“Government is committed to providing easy-to-use, trusted and flexible information and transaction services that are delivered digitally by default. For those for whom digital channels are less accessible, the government will ensure access is maintained through a network of ‘assisted digital’ service provision.”

In the past decade a number of scholars have discussed the problems of multi-channel delivery of public services. This is a battle line on which public values have long conflicted. As Klievink and Janssen [1] have pointed out, maintaining multiple channels is complicated and expensive; delivering services digitally is much more economical and efficient (if not always as effective). The difficulty is, of course, that not all citizens have access to on-line services and even many of those that do prefer to do business with the government by other means and in particular face to face. Despite this, the government seems committed to this concept. Minister for the Cabinet Office Frances Maude has publically espoused the philosophy of delivering certain services in digital form only [2]. In this, the UK government is not alone. I recently attended a presentation by a senior Danish official outlining how this idea was being implemented in his country (and, I might add, with the same cavalier attitude to those who might not like the idea). The ‘Strategic Implementation Plan’ does recognise the risk of a low level of citizen uptake of these on-line services. Unfortunately, the proposed mitigating responses to such an outcome comprise the usual well worn nostrums. Citizens will be “*encouraged*” and “*incentivised*” to take up on-line services (where have we heard this before?). A “*user-centric approach*” will be adopted (and that too?). One cannot help but feel that there is an uneasy mixture of both wishful and “let them eat cake” thinking about this idea. Well heeled Oxbridge-educated politicians and civil servants may not fully appreciate the problems that many lesser mortals have in dealing with technology.

The award for the most intriguing departure from tradition, even by New Public Management standards, must go to the proposed establishment of a government skunkworks. This term comes from “Skunk Works”, the name of a Lockheed Martin development programme in California which was famous for its unofficial experiments and innovative technological developments. It is hard not to feel that a government skunkworks is something of a contradiction in terms. Governments are not known for letting public servants have the type of freedoms a skunkworks implies. It will be interesting to see just how good the government is at keeping out of the kitchen. If it can avoid interfering, it will be even more interesting to see what emerges.

Skunkworks apart, several of the more detailed policies are also quite innovative – at least for government. For example, there will be a presumption against projects having a lifetime value of more than £100 million. At one level this makes sense. It is well established that overruns on ICT projects increase exponentially as the scale of a project grows. Again, it will be interesting to see how well the government manages to make this policy stick. Many government projects are necessarily big to start with and their bigness is all too often amplified by political (with both a small and a large ‘p’) ambition, not to say overreach. Where, for example, would this limit leave outsourcing? The Aspire ten year multibillion pound deal with Capgemini and Fujitsu for the outsourcing of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) does not seem a likely candidate for breaking down into £100 million chunks. On the

other hand, if this policy were to lead to the end of grandiose total outsourcing projects of this nature, that might be no bad thing.

There are also moments that raise a wry smile. One such is the recognition of the erosion of the ICT skill base within government caused by outsourcing and the problems to which this has led. Machiavelli's remark that "*Mercenaries and auxiliaries are useless and dangerous. If a prince bases the defence of his state on mercenaries he will never achieve security*" springs to mind. Still, it is good to see a Conservative government minister acknowledging, even if only implicitly, that there is actually a need for highly skilled (and suitably paid) ICT staff on the public payroll and that reliance on the supposedly more efficient private sector to deliver ICT services is not always an unmitigated good.

On a personal note, it is good to see that something I have long advocated, namely the importance of continuity in leadership and accountability, is recognised as important. The idea of creating a common infrastructure, part two of the strategy, will probably raise more than a few eyebrows in the sense that this is such an obvious thing for governments to do that one cannot help but wonder why it has taken so long for the penny to drop. Interoperability in government systems, as I have also argued elsewhere [3], seems to move at a glacial pace, driven forward fitfully by injections of good intent from both sovereign governments and bodies such as the European Commission. It remains to be seen whether this latest outbreak of resolve will go the way of many previous expressions of good intent. The problem with interoperability is that there is a yawning chasm between the statement that we want it and what that means in terms of practical actions and in particular organisational, political and legislative change as well as technical standardisation. One would like to think that this time the government really means it. Another noteworthy policy is a commitment to agility. The word 'agile' is used with circumspection and in a way which is not entirely clear. The government does not seem committing to agile development (which really would be a departure), but rather to agile project development, an altogether more fuzzy concept.

The 'Strategic Implementation Plan' lists a total of 19 projects and identifies by name the Senior Responsible Officers (SROs) who will be responsible and accountable for delivery of each of these projects. The timetable for delivery is ambitious and, bearing in mind governments' history in this area, optimistic. By 2016 the government is projecting an annual saving of £460 million on the current base cost of government IT. Reading through the individual projects yields the same curious mixture of *déjà vu*, current fashions and surprises as in the 'Strategy'. Like an alcoholic swearing to give up the drink, the government is promising to bring project overruns under control and reduce project failures. Implementation will be speeded up by, *inter alia*, the agile project methods noted above. Whatever it is, agile project development is forecast to change delivery timescales by 20%. The document does not say in which direction.

The plan rattles through the current technologies *du jour*. Cloud computing, crowdsourcing, social networking and green ICT each get honourable mention as do older ideas like application program interfaces, a reference architecture and data centre consolidation. One group that should pay particular attention to the government's plans is suppliers. Suppliers will have to meet mandatory open technical standards. The proposed reference architecture (a project to be led by HMRC) will impact suppliers directly as will the moves to increase re-use of software, to accelerate standardisation and to shift towards open systems. If the move from customisation to off-the-shelf software does occur (and one cannot but be somewhat sceptical about this), this too will have implications for software suppliers creating opportunities for some and problems for others.

Finally, for the attentive reader, there are some fascinating moments buried in the detail. One of the most striking is the admission, on page 51 of the implementation plan, that:

“Government is not realising the very significant intrinsic value of the information it holds as it has not previously treated information as an organisational asset”.

If one pauses to think about it, this is an extraordinary confession. The importance of information as a key corporate asset dates back to at least as far as the early 1980s (see, for example [4]). That in the second decade of the 21st century, it is beginning to dawn on our public servants that information in valuable tells us much about computing in the public sector. Still, better late than never.

In summary this is an eclectic pair of documents. They are made up of a goodly helping of traditional government boilerplate, much re-cycling of long established ideas/apparent realisations of what has been known for many years combined with a number of genuinely radical proposals. Taken as a whole, the strategy seems well balanced and if implemented will undoubtedly lead to a many improvements in the quality and cost effectiveness of government ICT. However, while there is a undertone of robust optimism throughout, history suggests that for citizens and taxpayers it would be well not to get too carried away just yet. By 2017 we will know the best or the worst.

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References

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