

Government IT failures – fact or fiction?

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How many times do we hear in the media of another government computer failure? A new industry has grown bringing together those who are opposed to new systems because of employment issues and those who have a vested interest in failure.

Examples of the first can be seen in classic HR stories such as:

“Double Government Computer Failure Shows Plans to Axe all Emergency Fire Control Rooms Will Cost Lives.” (PR Newswire Europe November 27, 2004)

The article said, “The latest Government computer crash at the Department of Work and Pensions shows the folly of the Government plans to axe all existing emergency fire control rooms. The move will make the fire brigade 999 service far more prone to catastrophic failure the union (FBU) says, putting lives at risk.”

Similarly a story in the South Yorkshire *Star* of 26 November 2004 was headed: **“Computer failure threat to benefits payments”**

It argued benefit payments to thousands of people in South Yorkshire could be delayed after what is thought to be the biggest-ever government computer failure. And it went on to say, “Trade unions are now calling on the Government to drop plans to cut 40,000 jobs in the DWP.”

The common link is not that they are IT stories but they are about people issues. Whilst it is perfectly understandable for Trade Unions to use all tools at their disposal to represent their members’ needs, examples like these cause an impression that the underlying technology is itself prone to failure. These examples date back before the last election and one simply asks whether the doom mongers’ predictions have come to pass. The answer is of course emphatically no.

And it is these stories that have led to a plethora of publications across the world that present the very real

challenge of any large-scale project as something to fear. In 2006 in New Zealand where Dunedin academics Robin Gauld and Shaun Goldfinch published **“Dangerous Enthusiasms – E-Government, Computer Failure and Information System Development”**, the central theme of which is information technology projects – especially big ones – generally exceed their budgets and timeframes, or fail to deliver the desired results, and it pays to be pessimistic. Similar pessimism can be seen in many other places. Indeed some have joked that *Computer Weekly* couldn’t exist without its diet of Government computer failure stories!

The latest and perhaps the biggest ever is Connecting for Health, the Government’s ambitious multi-billion pound project that is revolutionising the NHS. Is this a challenging programme – yes, is it expensive – yes, but is it broken – no! It has been the victim of concerted efforts by people who should know better than to undermine the tremendous progress and the successful roll-out of parts of the system.

Lord Warner, who, as a previous Health Minister, has followed this project over some years, named names and questioned the role of Professor Ross Anderson of Cambridge University, by quoting from a series of e-mails that have got into the public domain, apparently linking a group of academics, the “Big Opt Out” campaign and parts of the Conservative Party¹. You have to judge yourself the motives of the various people described in these exchanges and in the House of Commons on 6th June, where I set out similar arguments.²

There is room for some political debate in all of that but let us return to the substantive issue: Can the system meet the needs of a 21st Century Health Service?

Perhaps we should examine a few of the myths that are popularly quoted:³

It’s a waste of money: Ovum have



estimated that £4.4 billion is being saved through central procurement of IT systems by NHS CFH compared with what could have been achieved by individual NHS organisations purchasing the same systems separately.

Patients’ lives have been put at risk by systems going down: There is no such evidence. In any case what self-respecting designer would put together such a complex system without safety being paramount and there are always tried and trusted manual systems to fall back on in an emergency.

Technical architecture is flawed: The National Programme for IT is a platform that will ensure that all systems within the NHS can work together. It is not one enormous IT system. There is a robust technical architecture designed to cope with enormous volumes of traffic. The new applications are also being delivered gradually – there will be no “big bang”. This will ensure that the new systems continually evolve and there is a resolution of any problems that arise.

And it is even a myth that Scotland and Wales won’t be able to talk to each other!

We are a nation that has enormous success in “big science” and engineering projects, why on earth should we allow misguided people and sensationalist journalism to put us off our stride? Connecting for Health will be good for the Nation’s health.

REFERENCES

¹ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200607/dhansrd/text/70621-0010.htm>

² <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmhansrd/cm070606/debtext/70606-0011.htm#07060669001693>

³ <http://www.connectingforhealth.nhs.uk/>