

A Blueprint For Transformation by Patrick Smith.

The 'Transformational government, enabled by technology' document published last autumn by the Cabinet Office's e-Government Unit (eGU) sheds light on the trends that the government hopes will become the norm for technology deployment in public service delivery.

Now, with a new public sector spending review imminent, departments are being asked to think and plan ahead for what will be a competitive debate concerning their longer term funding.

For most departments, this spending review will be about how to deliver more with the same, or even less, money in real terms. It is therefore reasonable to expect that the efficiency agenda begun by Sir Peter Gershon's review will gain further momentum, with sustained pressure being applied to reduce back office and legacy IT costs so front line improvements can be realised. It is also likely that we will see the government making more use of transactional charging for services to offset or cover investments in new delivery models such as charges for national identity cards, road congestion and specific health or social services.

The 'Transformational government' strategy, which is positive and balanced in tone, identifies some issues and inefficiencies that are imperatives for action. These include meeting increased demand for electronic access to services; the need to rationalise many of the call centre and back office functions that exist across government; and the need to migrate high cost legacy IT systems to new ones that offer greater effectiveness and efficiency.

The strategy identifies three key areas on which public sector bodies should focus: shared services; citizen- or business-focused services; and IT professional development.

While some central government departments have already committed to or completed implementing shared services, further momentum is expected across central and local government. Technology, however, is only one component in delivering success, particularly where shared services are to be delivered across traditional 'silos.' Transformational leadership and investment in effective communication and change management will be essential, particularly when staff involved in delivering legacy back office services sense a threat of redundancy or a transfer to front office work.

It is also interesting to observe that the eGU's strategy positions at "centre stage" the need to build capacity within the public sector's cadre of IT professionals. With such demand and growth in IT services over the past two decades and with public sector wage constraints, government has struggled to attract and retain a big enough pool of IT talent; it has, in fact, further reduced its talent pool with multiple mass

transfers of staff to the private sector as part of the outsourcing of many IT departments across central and local government.

It is only recently that this anomaly has started to be addressed with a number of high profile public sector appointments of senior, experienced IT professionals from the private sector, including Ian Watmore. While a mass migration of IT professionals from public to private sector is not foreseen, it seems reasonable to predict growing public sector demand for private sector insight and experience. Perhaps more secondments will be encouraged, helping both public and private sector IT organisations to understand how better to mitigate risks and seize opportunities around technology deployment.

Hardest to predict is how the thrust will develop to make public services more customer-focused on citizens or businesses. Demand for customer relationship management (CRM) software and services can be expected to increase, so front line office staff can be better equipped to engage with their customers and meet public service expectations. It will also be interesting to see how the role of customer group directors - to be appointed by government to represent the interests of specific groups such as older people - will develop, and how they can help to achieve an optimal yet cost effective balance in meeting demand through different channels such as web, phone and face to face.

By considering the political and economic landscape and the eGU's strategy, it seems safe to make some predictions as to how technology may be used in supporting future public service delivery. The drive for further efficiency through swapping out legacy IT systems and deploying shared service models can be expected to feature strongly across central and local government.

It will however be interesting to see how public sector chief information officers and board-level colleagues will address the expectation to design and deploy technology that will place greater focus in meeting customer interests and expectations, particularly for those customer interests that straddle the interests of central and local government bodies. This challenge only adds further weight to eGU's argument that enhancing IT professionalism across government will be key in meeting the Transformational Government agenda.

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