

To Arms and Technology

...the election battle cry rings out

For the first time technology has seriously entered the general election battle ground – from party political rhetoric to parties' use of social media, technology has a key part to play and opinions to sway.

Technology benefits are being promised to the excluded and the disenfranchised from one side intent on managing the unmanageable. On the other, the chattering classes are being courted with promised slashing of the ID card, ContactPoint and health plan for IT projects.

Another day, another electioneering promise. Either side charges the other with profligacy and misunderstanding of the technology whilst promising to use this panacea for all ills to deliver the efficiency savings that the public sector desperately needs to ride through this recession.

However, whoever wins the election will be in an unenviable position technology-wise. There is no money; but there is no let up in demand for service. Heroic attempts across the public sector to 'do more with less' have been foiled by culture and inertia and the easy 'low hanging fruit' has long since been picked.

The next step will be painful. Technology can ease that pain but while its understanding is tinged with party political electioneering the big picture will again be missed.

So far, no one is listening to the front line. And frontline ICT is stretched to breaking point, as Socitm's latest ICT Trends (page 5) attests.

Frontline ICT is overwhelmed with the demands, and battered from headcount and budget reductions. To add insult to injury it is also seen as just another service to be pruned and trimmed, not as a potential saviour to the problems facing public service delivery.

So why has technology never made it to the higher echelons? A jokey conversation at a recent press conference could be said to have concluded with agreement that councils' senior management and leadership were just 'too old' and of a different generation to grasp the importance of technology for transforming the organisation.

But that is not good enough. There isn't time to wait for this older generation to 'die out'. It is incumbent upon the technology sector to engage with the rest of the world. Instead of shaking their heads with a wry smile and saying, "Oh, they just don't get it", it is time to communicate the whys, the wherefores and, crucially, the evidence based business case for delivering technology driven change.

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Government and opposition race to free data

More than 2500 datasets from across government are now free for reuse by the public from a one-stop data shop, data.gov.uk.

"Making public data available for re-use is about increasing accountability and transparency and letting people create new, innovative ways of using it. Government data should be a public resource," said inventor of the world wide web and key player in the release of this data, Sir Tim Berners-Lee.

"By releasing it, we can unlock new ideas for delivering public services, help communities and society work better, and let talented entrepreneurs and engineers create new businesses and services," he added.

However, mayor of London, Boris Johnson, beat the government to 'free data' sainthood by launching the London Datastore two weeks before the government's data.gov.uk launch party. Technically, the government data is available first, as Johnson made his announcement prior to a promised go-live date of 29 January.

Politics notwithstanding, the advent of free, reusable 'non-personal' government data under an 'open' licence is to be welcomed and applauded. Perhaps more so if postcode and Ordnance Survey data had been included in the offering.

Professor Nigel Shadbolt, one of the site's prime instigators, said that the launch "marked an important step forward" in the work prime minister, Gordon Brown, announced last December in 'Putting the Frontline First: Smarter Government'. The aim, he said, was for the release of public data to be "business as usual" across the public sector.

Give Cabinet Office teeth

A single minister of state post, with a 'coherent, cross-government IT brief' ranging from IT security to digital inclusion to industry policy, should be created, finds a report from the Institute for Government think tank.

'Installing New Drivers', concludes that 'the centre' - the Cabinet Office and/or the Treasury - 'needs to do more' to drive public sector IT strategies. Throughout government, states the report, 'Ministers frequently do not pay sufficient attention to the IT dimension of policy announcements. Coupled with the overriding importance attached to individual ministers' initiatives, this can lead to the wheel being reinvented across government. IT is often seen as a political after-thought because it enters the decision-making process too far 'downstream', when plans and deadlines are already fairly definite.'

www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk

Applications showing the traffic flows and congestion on the motorway network and a 'postcode newspaper' are already in preview stage. Others in progress include applications showing school catchment and performance, house prices, local amenities and services, or access to local hospitals.

Over at City Hall, the new London Datastore will "unleash valuable facts and figures that been languishing for far too long in the deepest recesses of City Hall," said Johnson. "I firmly believe that access to information should not just be the preserve of institutions and a limited elite. Data belongs to the people, particularly that held by the public sector, and getting hold of it should not involve a complex routine of jumping through a series of ever decreasing hoops."

Both projects take much from the lead of president Obama's administration in the US with the esteemed Data.gov open public data site which, according to US chief information officer, Vivek Kundra, contains "more than 168,000 datasets online".

<http://data.gov.uk>
www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk
<http://data.london.gov.uk>

Local spending reports online

Details of how councils and other agencies spend public money will be put online from the summer as part of a shake-up of local spending reports. Communities secretary, John Denham, said that the new-look reports will provide greater transparency, saving people from trawling through a series of reports and statistics on how their taxes are being put to use. Reports are to be published in "a clear and user friendly format", instead of in "a series of excel spreadsheets" as at present.

www.places.communities.gov.uk

PRIZE DRAWS

Thank you to all those that participated in the research stages of our latest reports and congratulations to the winners of the prize draws for each:

Connecting the Public Sector

- £50 Amazon Voucher - David Flintham, Group Manager, Customer & Information Services, Waltham Forest London Borough

eForms in a Digital Britain

- 3G 8GB iPod nano – Peter Kendrick, Head of Technology, Stafford Borough Council
- £50 Amazon Voucher – Karen Whalley, Principal Service Development Manager, Trafford Council

Prizes are on their way to the winners. For a copy of either report please email Helen Olsen: helen@infopub.co.uk