

# Mobile, Flexible, and Learning?

*Michael Cross wonders why public sector organisations find it so hard to learn from each other - especially when it comes to the implementation of new technology.*



I attended a fascinating conference, the other day, on the very hot topic of mobile technology in public services. As I was in the chair, I didn't have much time to take notes, but I learned a lot about the current state of debate around wireless security and the vulnerability of certain technologies as well as on more mundane issues such as battery management and encouraging frontline staff to look after their kit.

In fact, exactly the sort of knowledge that would be very useful indeed to local authorities moving to mobile and flexible working. But, as far as I could make out, there was no one from local government in the audience. The event was about IT in policing, so that was where the attendees came from.

From the organisers' point of view, that was a good result. However it seemed to me symptomatic of a problem endemic in public sector take-up of new technologies. The problem is an extreme reluctance to admit that other parts of the public sector might have useful lessons to be learned.

Organisations like the IDEa have enough trouble persuading councils to learn from other local authorities; to learn from the NHS, the police or the armed forces seems entirely off the agenda.

Some knowledge, of course, is specific to institutions or professions, and if there's one lesson to be learned from the catalogue of IT programme failures it's that we ignore institutional or professional cultures at our extreme peril. But it also seems daft to ignore experience from organisations that have decades of experience in facing technical problems because those organisations are 'not like us'.

A new report from the National Audit Office suggests that this isn't just a local government thing.

The report, 'Helping Government Learn', paints a picture of the public sector's inability to absorb others' experience, especially when it comes to IT: 'Past reports by the comptroller and auditor general and the Committee of Public

Accounts have examined problems with projects and programmes, and with policy implementation. In many cases, these problems could have been avoided if lessons had been learnt from the past.'

In other words, we're running repeatedly into brick walls - as one member of the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee used to put it colourfully, during a dismal run of hearings into government IT disasters.

It doesn't have to be this way. Behind the inevitable jargon, the NAO's report finds examples of public organisations that have embedded learning within their cultures, and suggests ways in which others, in turn, could learn from them.

One example is from the NHS: the Productive Ward Programme, which aims to increase the amount of time front line staff spend in direct contact with patients.

According to the NAO, it is 'designed so that ward staff are able to shape and follow training modules in ways that match their needs and priorities'. The secret is to allow staff to contribute to the changes made to their wards - and to give them enough time to work through the modules and guidance provided. 'Learning initiatives work best when they meet genuine demands from the frontline,' the NAO states.

There's even an IT programme among the exemplars.

The Identity and Passport Service's ePassports programme wins plaudits for its ability to listen and learn while meeting a tight externally set deadline. Among other things, the report commends it for publishing annual reports on the implementation of its main projects. 'Each report sets out the project objectives, and identifies what has been delivered and the lessons learnt, both in terms of good practice and areas for improvement.'

Other tips, according to the NAO, are:

- Make staff feel it is safe to speak up about failure and new ideas for example, by having discussions about

specific problem projects.

- Encourage the sharing of knowledge within the organisation and discourage knowledge hoarding by teams.
- Reward the generation of new ideas and an enquiring approach, as well as the successful completion of projects.
- Encourage face to face collaboration through networks and through training in team skills.
- Institutionalise the systematic reflection on performance after projects, even if it means delaying moving on to the next project for a while.
- Make sure that learning from consultants is captured before they end their contact with the organisation, and include knowledge transfer in the terms of the contract.

On the face of it, these are not difficult practices to emulate.

Why, then, does the public service find it so difficult? The report offers one clue: 'There has been a proliferation of toolkits, guidance and other products to help government learn. These have been useful but there is a danger of guidance overload.' It suggests rationalising the guidance and support on offer.

In other words, less time talking about learning and more time doing it.

All this sounds like excellent advice. But I'd like to add one small criticism: for all the good sense shown by the report, it is noticeably silent on possibly the most exciting development available to learning organisations - the emergence of electronic social media for passing back the experience of staff and users to decision makers in real-time.

The gap is all the more obvious in the climate created by the Working Together public services strategy, itself based on much local government experience.

Possibly the NAO needs to do some learning of its own.

Michael.Cross@infopub.co.uk