Technology isn't to blame for the government's recent computer problems.
Samantha Downes

Problems and delays with government computing projects have blighted the lives of thousands of people this summer, from holiday-makers to students. But industry experts point to the human factor rather than information technology itself as the source of the problems.

They insist that pigeonholing the difficulties that have plagued attempts to update computerised systems at the Passport Agency and the Post Office as "technical" only veils their real cause – poor management, inadequate training and insufficient staff. Colin Thompson, deputy chief executive of the British Computer Society (BCS), said the human factor and its part in determining a project's success or failure has been underestimated.

"The failure of IT projects and their ability to deliver what they say they will has been going on for 30 years, almost as long as IT itself," Thompson says, "At least 5 per cent of all large-scale developments are cancelled, while in the average project the installation of software scheduled takes more than 50 per cent longer than originally projected".

"He argues that if an auditor took into account every project's end goal at conception, then "75 per cent of IT projects would be classed as operating failures".

"But only the large failures hit the surface, so many smaller ones go unreported," he says. "The reason government projects become so conspicuous is because they affect more people."

Thompson believes that the reason for failure lies not in the technology itself, more in the expectations placed on it. "A project that fails sometimes becomes so complex in transferring users' needs into an IT system that it fails either to meet its goal or its end goal is not understood. On top of that, users' needs are overlooked," Thompson says. "But very often the technology employed at the beginning of the project is out of date before it finishes".

Such a failure to anticipate technological change became apparent in May when the Government admitted that its Horizon project – a smart card scheme to speed the payment of benefits and stamp out fraud – would be three years late. The contractor, ICL, was forced to scrap the card because its magnetic strip, the Department of Trade and Industry conceded, was outdated. ICL, working with the Benefits Agency and Post Office Counters, is on target to replace the system with a smart card by 2003 at the UK's 18,000-plus Post Offices.

"The delay of the project ends up affecting at least 15 million people, the cost of which has yet to be determined. There was just no prediction of the technology," said one union source.

Beware of the human factor

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By Samantha Downes

The BCS acknowledges that IT project failure is to an extent endemic, but that more could be done to qualify project managers and those beneath them. "The scope for such public systems to go wrong is enormous as it is," Thompson says. "We have got to get professional. In the UK there are 750,000 employed in IT, yet only 5 per cent have a recognised qualification. Can you imagine that ratio of qualified to unqualified in the accountancy profession? So many problems are down to poor management and poor skills. A standard qualification with a minimum level would go a long way to stopping the kinds of chaos we have seen this summer."

Staff training proved to be the nemesis of the Passport Agency's computerisation attempt, the result being the queues witnessed at its London office early in the summer.

Siemens was put in charge of the £230m 10-year contract to process passport applications prior to their printing. A Home Office spokesman explained: "The main problem was the training of staff to operate the new system. They were not trained enough and that was because far more human input than had been foreseen was needed.

"We had cases of the computer system scanning in things but spelling it wrong. In the end, there was a much steeper learning curve than had been expected."

David Taylor, president of the Association of IT Directors, argues that it is management, not the staff, who need to be brought into line.

"People don't seem to want to be accountable or take ownership of the project throughout its life. In the public sector heads don't roll as early as they would in the private sector.

"There has to be some amount of leadership and if things go wrong someone has to accept the blame – that's when problems start to get sorted," he says.

Brendan Murphy, of the Local Government Association, agrees that this was the case when the processing of student loan applications fell behind last month. He points to a breakdown in

communications between local education authorities (LEAs), the Student Loans Company, which is responsible for sending out the cheques, and the Department for Education and Employment.

Murphy says the reason for the delay was not problems with the software that local authorities used to calculate students' loan eligibility, but with the DfEE. He says: "The software package we had been sent by the Government did not work. We have been asking the Government for more software – we had been telling them that all we needed was the right software."

A spokesman at the DfEE says that problems with software had threatened to delay the student loan applications, but that problems had been ironed out.

However, Murphy contends: "If responsibility had been accepted sooner, then there would have been no threat of delay."

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