

Moving from transmission to collaboration

A recent report from think tank Demos addresses what it sees as the real challenge of e-government and urges, beginning with its title, 'Transformation, not Automation'. In summary, if all that results from the present e-government initiative is a migration of traditional practices and 'red tape' to an all-electronic process, then government, all of us, will have missed a defining opportunity that is now within reach.

The recently published Court Service consultation paper 'Modernising the Civil Courts', though containing many proposals which offer incremental improvement, nevertheless falls short of the transformation that could be achieved. The reason for this is simply that the Court Service is following a traditional 'transmission' model and not a collaborative one.

In an article published in the last issue of this journal, I set out to explain why the so-called 'next generation' technologies can be truly valuable to professionals and clients alike. In this article I will look at the broader landscape of business and professional services on the one hand, and what is being called 'joined-up justice' on the other. I will identify where I see the opportunity for transformation and offer my own vision for a communications platform that meets the common and individual needs of private and public sector alike.

In the course of this article I will refer to two distinct groups:

Government – including national and local government, regulatory authorities (such as the Patent Office, Companies House) and bodies such as the Legal Services Commission and the Small Business Service

Citizen – individuals and all forms of commercial operations, national or otherwise, and their professional service providers

Transmission vs. Collaboration

We communicate today in a transmission paradigm. To achieve transformation rather than just automation we must move to a collaborative paradigm.

When we communicate, other than by direct speech, we reduce the substance of our communication to some documented form. That document is then transmitted, either physically or, nowadays, electronically. When one sends to another, the sender keeps a record of what was sent and of its despatch; the receiver keeps what was received and a record of its receipt. The inevitable result is the maintenance of duplicate, or more often non-duplicate, records of correspondence.

In a collaborative paradigm, all involved operate within the same systems infrastructure. A collaborative system essentially comprises a self-contained software and data environment - providing a common 'enclosure' with entry security; a common workplace with private workspaces; a common data store with individual access control. In such a system the system itself manages publication by the sender and notification to the recipient, providing a record of those actions and access to the relevant document. Consequently, documents and the information they contain may be 'shared' instantaneously with others – everyone, as the Americans like to say, 'reading from the same page'.

E-Government

Government has embarked on an e-business programme with a target completion date of 2005, of which the Court Service initiative forms part, and expects to invest substantial amounts of taxpayers' money developing various collaborative technologies, including specifically ones that facilitate interactions between government and citizen. Recent announcements report on the creation of the 'Government Gateway', principally supported by Microsoft, in which an initial investment of £15M has already been made. The Court Service consultation paper also refers to 'Gateway Partnerships'

The problem with a 'Gateway' is that citizens only have the benefit of the technology during the process of interaction. Once that interaction is completed, citizens are then left to manage their own records and technology requirements according to their means. The result - government would be vastly better equipped than the community it serves. A way must be found to ensure that citizens are adequately equipped for the proper conduct of their own affairs; this involves bringing particularly businesses and their professional advisors into an estate of technological parity.

E-Business

The plight of the common man and his lawyer could not be more clearly highlighted than in Professor Susskind's new book, 'Transforming the Law', in which he renews his vision of the role of technology in legal practice. His now familiar 'Grid' basically breaks the business of the Law and attendant use of technology into four areas or categories: first, basic office systems such as accounting, time recording, document creation, email, etc; second, internal knowledge management systems (or, for simple folk, precedent libraries); third, client facing technology that allows clients to look at electronic files, billing records, and other information; and lastly, 'online services'.

There can be few legal practices left in the country that do not have systems in the first category. Those lawyers who do not have access to systems fulfilling some or all of the other are suffering from what Susskind calls 'The Technology Lag'. There are more than 100,000 lawyers in the UK. Law Society statistical figures for 1999 indicate that of 10,000 solicitor firms, 42% are sole practitioners; 41% have 2-4 partners; 11% have 5-10 partners. How are these firms to bridge this 'Technology Lag'?

Other professional groups, and the clients they serve, face the same challenge.

This is a nettle that surely must be grasped if the e-government vision is not to be undermined by the citizens' practical inability to invest sufficiently to keep pace with Government.

Common Needs

Software, through ASP and the Internet, can be made universally accessible. Consequently, a common platform, comprising a self-contained virtual working environment, can be readily provided as a service to a broad community of users. This platform can then be augmented by so-called 'web services' – specific applications developed by independent software developers to meet individual needs.

This is essentially what Microsoft have proposed in the recent launch of their 'HailStorm' initiative – a super ASP providing basic tools/services (including those that underpin the Government

Gateway) to be supplemented by applications developed by so-called 'Web ISVs' (Web Independent Software Vendors). Microsoft seems set to become the dominant web service provider and while accommodating cross-platform solutions will clearly be well placed to promote its own.

Now consider the administration of justice and, I suggest, the administration of regulation (local government and other regulatory authorities) and their interactions with citizens. Commercial operations of any form inevitably require at various stages of their existence contact with administrative authorities; examples of such contact include registration, seeking of consent, and conflict resolution. Such contact may be direct or, in many cases, through professional advisors.

Contact with these administrative authorities is managed primarily through transmission of written communications in which relevant information is exchanged. Other than those seeking pure information, all contacts entail some form of process, initiated by application and concluding with some form of adjudication. Such processes involve the application of rules and a sequence of events governed in some way by time; the rules may be fixed or, in some cases, may be made ad hoc (such as a procedural order made by a High Court Master). The main point to note is that the process is common to both the applicant and the authority.

What happens at present is that government and citizen each maintain independent records of what has passed between them. When the authority requires something to be done by the applicant, a record and diary note must be made in the authority's system; the citizen must then also make a record and diary note in its system. If both were using the same system then the duplication of effort, and the attendant risk of error, would be obviated.

The communications between government and citizen, to a greater or lesser degree prompted and influenced by inherent process, when aggregated with 'internal' communications and information belonging to either party, represents the universe of relevant data that each may wish to view and analyse.

In summary, I see three essential functions that are required in common by government and citizen

Communications – the expression and exchange of information and ideas

Process – the conduct of particular activities by reference to rules and events

Views – presentation and analysis of captured information

The Electronic File

The Court Service consultation paper addresses the notion of an electronic case file and it is this component among the array of proposals that for me represents the key opportunity for transformation through collaboration.

The Court Service will, if it pursues this particular solution, be creating a communications management platform into which may be incorporated specific process and view capabilities.

Individual case files would constitute individual 'venues' which could equally equate to what are variously referred to as a projects, files, jobs, matters, or otherwise. Such a venue becomes the place where all digital work product is created and stored.

In a collaborative environment, each venue has an owner who authorises access to the venue by others with whom the owner wishes to communicate. Users enjoy privacy within the resulting workspace, sharing work product and communicating by granting access to what they have created. In this way each user group has its own private workspace, though the venue is in fact the same. Once the nature and purpose of the venue is defined, this 'singularity' becomes of pivotal importance as it facilitates delivery of relevant knowledge, information, templates, and process rules where and when they are needed.

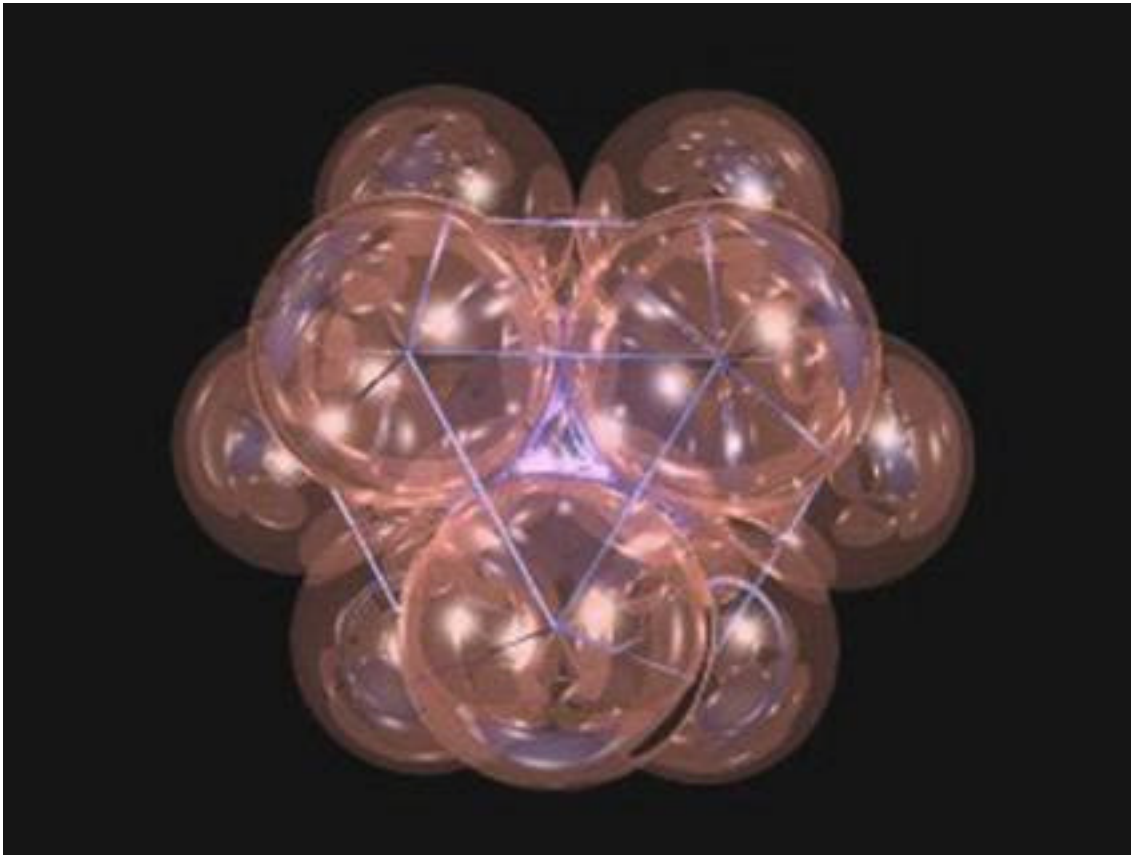
Why should the investment in software development to create such an electronic file capability be enjoyed only by and for the purposes of the Court Service?

Imagine a super ASP platform that provides the basic tools, incorporating the basic communication and process rules, required to facilitate the conduct of interactions within and between government and citizen. Those tools are then made available and made useful to both, for their interactions and for their own purposes. There is no absolute need to start out with a single platform, though to do so would secure other practical benefits that go far beyond mere data transmission.

Visualization

One invaluable practice in developing a vision is to have something to visualize. I have two particular images in mind.

The first is one that illustrates the geometric basis for geodesic structures and which well represents of the interrelationships within and between government and citizen. The picture is of a stack of spheres connected through their centres – imagine that the spheres represent individual citizen and government organizations; the connections between them illustrate the 'information and communication technology' axis, the axis that provides the basis for geodesic structures.



The next image is that of a geodesic dome and the best example is the fabulous Eden Project structure in Cornwall (see www.edenproject.com). It provides a vast, safe, enclosed structure that has integrity by virtue of its construction formula and provides an ideal environment for what is contained within it. The Eden project domes provide biospheres with ideal conditions for cultivation and propagation. (Lest I start sounding too much like Peter Sellers in his memorable role as Chance the gardener, I'll leave it there)



Virtual Geodesics

Collaborative technologies do not create physical structures such as the Eden Project, however they can create self-contained, secure environments within which business can be safely conducted. The best example of a virtual 'geodesic' environment that I can think of to illustrate one aspect of what I am proposing is the London Stock Exchange. The LSE provides an electronic trading environment that has embedded rules – when transactions are made within the system, the system itself provides the means of communication and record, capable of review and audit in the event of dispute.

Imagine then an electronic working environment that has embedded rules relating to communication and process so that communication and notification are systemic, and from which an absolute record of such communication and notification may be accessible in the event of dispute.

Proposition

UK government, working with key infrastructure partners, has the means to sponsor the creation of a national communications platform that will accommodate the communications and process requirements of both government and the business community. This platform would provide a secure self-contained environment for the conduct of relations within and between government and citizen.

Such a platform would transform business and government by providing a virtual environment that

has embedded business rules, facilitates the administration of justice and regulation, and meets common needs. The platform would provide a basic suite of communications and process management tools from which independent web services could be developed to meet individual needs. This amounts to providing the same vehicle for all – technological parity. How one drives that vehicle is of course another matter!

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April 2001

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