

## IT contractors are first to admit: public sector IT is profitable, but results poor

Public sector IT. All too often, there is way too much focus on the technology and not nearly enough on defining the problem. Which means that IT contractors build great systems, but those systems will never do what they were intended to, because the public sector specifiers never bothered to work out what the projects were really for in the first place!

That the results of the [investigation into bungled government IT projects](#) by the Independent have been published in the same week as the new [Government IT strategy](#) is almost certainly no coincidence.

And it is highly probable that, given the flood of buzzwords in the new strategy and some of the breathtaking assumptions, for example that a single set of PC specifications can satisfy the requirements of six million public sector employees – the latest strategy is set to repeat the mistakes of its precursors.


But why does the public sector keep doing this? What scuppers most IT projects is the 'requirements risk', or what you want the project or software to actually do. If you get the requirements wrong from the start, you may as well not bother with all the other important aspects of an IT project, like quality, usability, maintainability, and so on.

Yet, all too often, that's just what happens in public sector IT. In their personal quest for career enhancement, and to ensure the right jargon is noticed by those higher up in the civil service or ministerial food chain, many public sector IT specifiers lose sight of the original business case. So, as they sex up the project, they water down the objectives and do whatever they need to so the project gets approved.

Technology vendors also play a big part in creating a culture of inappropriate specifying by promoting the need for the next big thing that will [achieve greater productivity] [save money] [increase return on investment]\* (\* delete as appropriate). But when it comes down to it, if you build something no-one wants, it doesn't matter what you build it from!

The final nail in the coffin of public sector IT is that defining requirements requires decisions. Sadly, many public servants don't like making those, because it means they have to take responsibility. And decisions taken by committee don't tend to be decisive. All of which leads to a requirements risk disaster.

So, in all likelihood, unless the civil service and future governments – of whichever party – learn to focus on the business case for IT and steer away from head-in-the-clouds futurology, we will probably see another round of £26bn public sector IT blunders.

	<p><b>Dave Chaplin</b> CEO ContractorCalculator</p>	<p><a href="#">View all our commentators</a> ▶</p>	<p>Dave Chaplin is a former IT contractor in the City of London, and is founder and CEO of ContractorCalculator, and author of the Contractors' Handbook.</p>
<p><i>Market Commentator</i> 🖱️</p>		<p>Started in 1999, ContractorCalculator (this site) is the leading independent website for the UK contracting industry – most of whom are highly skilled knowledge workers.</p>	
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