

# The e-Citizen as talk, as text and as technology: CRM and e-Government

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**Abstract:** Public service transformation in the UK is being carried out in the name of the citizen and these changes – specifically those labelled as ‘e-Government’ – bring with them the prospect of a significant shift in the nature of the relationship between government and its citizens. Of particular interest is the notion of the e-Citizen, set against a contemporary public management backdrop featuring customer-centric discourses/metaphors, organisational transformation and ICT-intensive ‘private-sector’ business solutions. This paper focuses on a pilot study concerned with exploring the nature and role of socio-technical and discursive factors which may be implicated in the ‘shaping’ of the e-Citizen around the introduction of ‘customer relationship management’ (CRM) systems at a local government level. The research design draws on ‘social shaping of technology’ approaches and emphasises the significance of discursive events in these shaping processes. Preliminary findings suggest that citizen-users of the new face to face access channel within local e-government are being configured primarily as ‘customers’ which we suggest has significant implications for the traditional relationship between individuals and the institutions of government..

**Keywords:** e-government, citizen, customer service, discourse, technology

## 1. Introduction

The reform of public services is being carried out in the name of the citizen – but who exactly is this citizen? Ambitious and far-reaching attempts to transform public services – specifically those labelled as ‘e-Government’ – bring with them the prospect of a significant shift in the nature of the relationship between government and its citizens. Of particular interest is the notion of the *e-Citizen*, set against a contemporary public sector management backdrop featuring customer-centric discourses/metaphors, organisational transformation and ICT-intensive ‘private-sector’ business solutions. This paper is concerned with the nature and role of socio-technical and discursive factors which may be implicated in the ‘shaping’ of the e-Citizen around the introduction of ‘customer relationship management’ (CRM) systems. It begins by introducing the place of CRM technologies in the e-government agenda, goes on to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of this research, before outlining some of the key findings of an exploratory pilot study. This study is drawn from a major research programme being conducted by the Centre for Social and Business Informatics (<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/unbs/sbi>) at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. The programme is examining various aspects

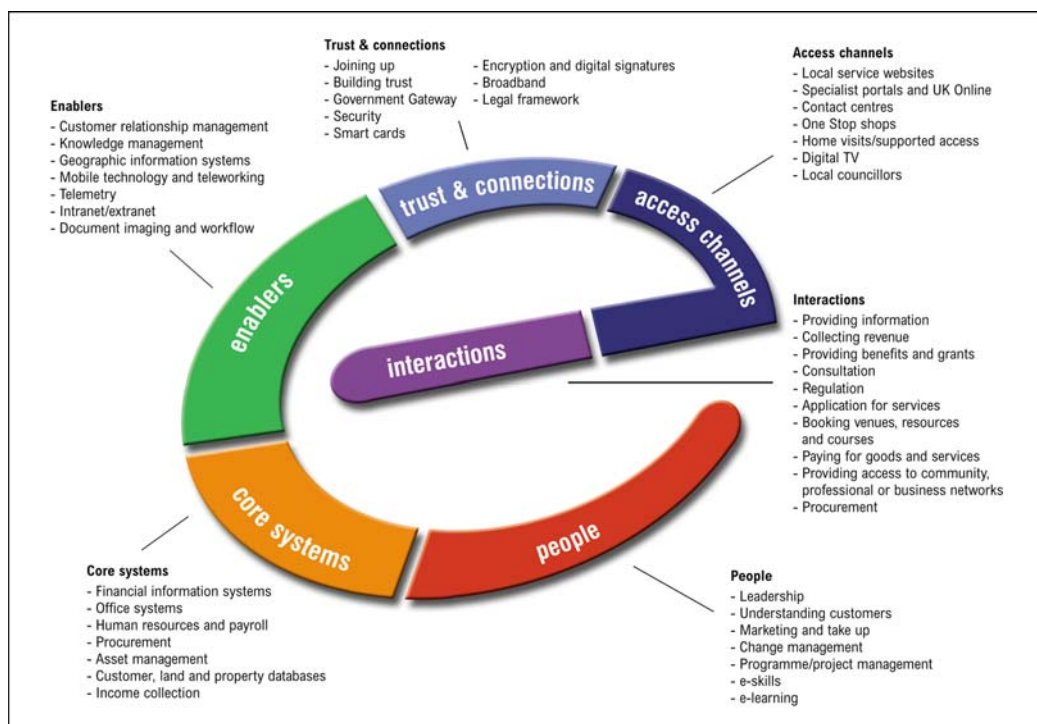
of the move towards e-government in the UK and Europe in a variety of contexts including health care; social and health services for children; higher education and virtual universities; public transport; and local government. The research reported in this paper was funded by the UK Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) as part of their ‘Systems Integration Initiative’ (<http://www.ideo.co.uk/SII/>).

## 2. CRM and e-Government

The citizen is, rhetorically at least, at the very heart of the ‘new public management’ (NPM) agenda which Western governments have been pursuing with increasing vigour during the last decade (see Osborne and Gaebler 1992, Bellamy and Taylor 1998, Hughes 2003). In a UK context, the intention is that modernisation will bring about improvements in service quality and organisational efficiency, to better serve citizens. The service user in this discourse is cast as a demanding actor: “People are exercising choice and demanding higher quality. In the private sector, service standards and service delivery have improved as a result. People are now rightly demanding a better service not just from the private sector, but from the public sector too” (*Modernising government* White Paper, 1999, p.10).

e-Government, a programme which is rooted in the modernisation agenda, is unambiguously presented as a process involving transformational change at the organisational level; “e-government is more than technology, more than the Internet, more than service delivery; it is about putting citizens and customers at

the heart of everything we do and building service access, delivery and democratic accountability around them” (DTLR 2002, p.2). These notions have been captured and articulated by central government in the form of the ‘e-Organisation’ (see *figure 1* below) as an aid for UK local authorities embarking on the restructuring process.



**Figure 1:** e-organisation (Illustration from Dailey 2003)

Arguably, CRM is the most significant of the e-Organisation’s ‘enablers’, and can be seen as playing a key role in redefining the relationship between local government agencies and their citizen-customers. For the purposes of this paper, it is important to acknowledge that “...the collection of philosophies and solutions that come under the heading of CRM ...start[ed] off in the private sector” (Shaw *et.al.* 2003, p.12). Traditionally, CRM is seen as “...adopting customer-centric business strategies, implementing these strategies by changing how customers do business and how people do work and then enabling new strategies, new customer interactions and new workflow by providing appropriate technology support” (CRMGuru.com quoted in: Shaw *et.al.*, 2003, p.6). Within a specifically public sector context, CRM is similarly perceived. The UK government’s ‘National CRM Programme’ defines CRM as “...the

strategies, approaches, ways of working and management techniques that can be used to help local authorities to improve service delivery through becoming customer focussed organisations” (Dailey 2003).

In more concrete terms, CRM in the contemporary setting of a local authority would feature these key characteristics:

- “Citizens are not directly connected into back offices
- Back office partners are not directly connected into the front office
- Citizens are directly connected into the front office
- The front office is directly integrated into the back offices
- The back office is directly connected into back office partners” (Shaw *et.al.*, 2003, pp.8-9)

These features are illustrated in *figure 2*,

an archetypal CRM-enabled council:

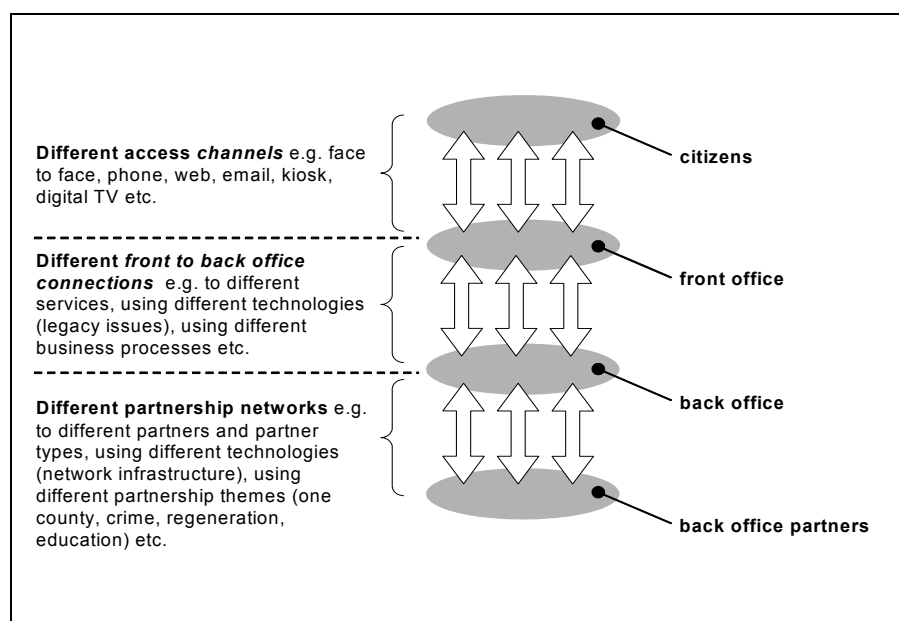


Figure 2 (Shaw et.al. 2003, p.8)

This paper is concerned with data generated primarily from the 'face to face' access channel of a local authority, a site which arguably represents a data-rich context for exploring the relationship between citizens and a key manifestation of CRM-enabled local e-government in practice.

### 3. Analytical framework: 'Social Shaping of Technology' and Organizational Discourse

At the heart of this paper is the idea of 'technology'; more specifically, information and communication technologies inherent in the processes of e-government. Bellamy and Taylor (1998) make the point that much information society rhetoric is guilty of a 'causal technicism', "...an implicit belief in an unproblematic causal progression from technological innovations to social change..." (p.18). They are keen to emphasise that these debates are more usefully viewed from a perspective which acknowledges "...the complex ways in which information and communications infrastructures and systems not only reflect, but become embedded in, the institutions of governance as active agents in their maintenance and reproduction" (p.19).

This approach is compatible with recent work by Jane Fountain (2001a) on 'enacted technology' which is gaining increasing prominence within e-government debates. Fountain also argues that ICTs and organizational/institutional arrangements are mutually influential; "Institutions and organizations shape the enactment of information technology. Technology, in turn, may reshape organizations and institutions to better conform to its logic. New information technologies are enacted – made sense of, designed, and used...through the mediation of existing organizational and institutional arrangements with their own internal logics or tendencies. These multiple logics are embedded in operating routines, performance programs, bureaucratic politics, norms, cultural beliefs, and social networks" (p.12).<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on these contingent approaches to the notion of technology, this research is seeking to open the 'black box' of local e-government ICTs (more specifically, those associated with CRM solutions) as a means of exploring the socio-technical processes – e.g. the choices and decisions over the procurement,

<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of 'enacted' technology in e-government context, see McLoughlin *et. al.* 2004

implementation and use of new systems - which, in part, are shaping the relationship between local government organizations and the citizen.

Much recent research has emphasized that a central part of such socio-technical processes is the way new technologies themselves are given meaning through the particular language – more broadly discourses – through which they come to be made sense of and understood. This focuses attention, in particular, on the metaphors (e.g. information ‘superhighways’) which emerge and become established as ‘defining’ what a technology is, what it can do, when it is working effectively and so on. In this, sense technologies can be seen as having the properties of ‘texts’, capable of being written in particular ways and then read by users in the way intended by the authors (designers) or indeed in other ways. This idea is known as ‘interpretative flexibility’ and offers a useful theoretical basis for posing the question; how might different actors, during the design, development and use of new CRM technologies in the public sector, make sense of and act upon these technologies, and with what implications for citizens? In this approach, for technologies to become ‘stabilised’ some form of ‘closure’ or ‘configuration’ around the potentially multiple meanings that might be associated with a new technology by different individuals, groups etc. has to occur. For some, the ‘readings’ associated with a technology provided by and embodied within systems by designers play a key role in ‘configuring’ the understandings of a technology by others – most specifically the users of that technology (Grint and Woolgar, 1997).

This paper has discussed a number of the key features of the transformation which e-government involves; organisational structures and processes, a profusion of ICTs and an overarching philosophical re-alignment. Extending the earlier discussion concerning the textual qualities of new technologies, what this paper emphasises is that each of these elements is brought to life and made meaningful by discourses at multiple levels, including those relating to prevailing public sector management trends and formalised e-government policy, as well as informal discourses employed by organisational actors. Discourses of particular

significance in the context of this paper might include those concerning the ‘customer’, CRM solutions, entrepreneurial/bureaucratic structures and so on. Such an approach can be likened to that of Fairclough (1992), who argues that the analysis of discursive events requires “examination of the language in use (*text dimension*); identification of textual production and interpretation (*discursive practice dimension*); and consideration of institutional and organizational factors surrounding the discursive event and how they might shape the discourse(s) in question (*social practice dimension*)” (Grant *et.al.* 1998, p.3).

The significance attached to discourse in this paper resonates with the work of others in this field. Drawing on Grant, Keenoy and Oswick’s work on ‘organizational discourse’, in a very general sense, discourse is understood “...not simply as a linguistic or semiotic mechanism, but as a mode of thinking” (1998, p.2). More specifically, the authors of this paper agree that “discourse not only shapes and directs organizational behaviours but also *constitutes* actors’ contested and contestable meanings. With such a reading, ‘organization’ can be seen as a continuous process of social accomplishment which, in both senses of the term, is *articulated* by and through the deployment of discursive resources” (*emphasis in original* Grant *et.al.* 1998, p.12).

Writing within the specific context of NPM-related change, Paul du Gay (2000), in discussing how contemporary programmes of public administration reflect a shift from bureaucratic to entrepreneurial ideals, characterises this process as a form of ‘discursive reimagination’. He suggests that it “...serves to incapacitate an institution’s ability to pursue its ongoing projects by effectively redefining its identity and hence what the nature of its projects actually are. After all, if a particular discourse is jettisoned or marginalised in favour of another, the world that discourse brings into being will no longer be available” (du Gay 2000, p.112).

In her analysis of ‘customer service’ and ‘market’ metaphors, currently being championed by Western governments,

Jane Fountain (2001b) is quite clear about the 'real' consequences of these actions. Distancing herself from those who see metaphoric devices as just "one more example of management jargon, a contemporary signal used by political elites to signal sophistication", Fountain argues that "metaphors shape attitudes, cognition and behaviour [whereby] terminology constitutes a forceful framing device for thought and action" (p.56). Guided by these understandings, this paper pays special attention to the role of e-government discourses in shaping the e-citizen and the 'world' (following du Gay) this actor inhabits.

Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller (1991) offer a useful conceptual framework within which to explore the mechanics of these discursive processes. In the same way that these authors refer to welfarism as a *political rationality* "...embodying certain principles and ideals and based upon a particular conception of the nature of society and its inhabitants" (pp.22-23), it may be useful to talk about entrepreneurialism and enterprise as today's political rationality, embodying principles associated with market mechanisms, agency partnership, innovation, customer-centrism and so on, at the same time constructing a related notion of the customer-citizen 'inhabitant'.

This rationality can be seen to have been animated through *governmental technologies* (see Rose and Miller 1991). In this respect, we could consider centrally formulated e-government strategy, manifested in, for example, the e-Government Strategic Framework and key report entitled 'Electronic Government Services for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', both published in 2000. Alongside the formal articulation of e-government policy and strategy, a plethora of governmental actors and agencies have been set up to develop and co-ordinate the realisation of the British e-government agenda. These include an e-Minister and e-Envoy, both of whom report directly to the Prime Minister, and who are supported by a group of 'e-Champions'. Closely associated with these actors, the 'Office of the e-Envoy', set up in September 1999 as part of the Cabinet Office, has a presence across the government's entire e-agenda, notably e-government and e-commerce.

These 'technologies' have been articulated via an array of *programmes of government* (see Rose and Miller 1991) in the shape of official reports, policy documents and so on, drawing on contemporary public sector management theory. In this way, the central tenets of entrepreneurial discourses and their practical implications are configured and legitimised, advancing a particular conception of the role of government and the strategies required to fulfil governmental ambitions.

#### 4. Site of pilot study

An exploratory pilot study conducted during the summer of 2003 sought to gain a meaningful insight into the world of those who bring to life the rhetoric of local e-government. In practice, this meant generating qualitative, largely interpretative, data from a series of semi-structured interviews with a number of key local government actors (system developers, local e-government managers, 'Customer Service' agents/supervisors and 'Customer Service' Trainers). The site of the study was the main 'Customer Service Centre' of a City Council located in the north east of England, which represents a useful example of a public sector institution embarking on the journey to become a thoroughly customer-centred 'e-Organisation'.

The e-government organisational structure set up to support this strategy features a Cabinet Member with specific responsibility for e-government, a Director, taking on the role of *e-Champion*, and an *e-Services panel*, set up "...to take a strategic overview role in ICT developments" (City Council's Implementing E-Government Statement 2002 p.35). The high profile afforded the local e-government agenda which is reflected in this structural arrangement is reinforced by a determination to develop a customer focus at a corporate level; "Seamless provision of information and service delivery will depend on all staff approaching the issue with the same attitude and skills set – this will represent a major culture change/challenge for the authority" (City Council's website). This challenge is, in part, being met by a comprehensive 'Corporate Customer Service Training Programme'. This features 'Customer Service Corporate Workshops' available to all staff, whether

customer-facing or not, and a 'Customer Service NVQ Certification Programme'. In addition, staff who attain the title of 'Customer Service Achiever' appear in the Council's newsletter.

The Council's Customer Service Centre (CSC) providing an empirical focus for this paper opened in 2000. The customer-facing staff, known in the Council as 'Generic Officers/Agents', are reported to "...give information about almost 100 different services on behalf of all the directorates". They deal with more than three thousand customers in a typical week and "...a significant percentage of customers liaising with any section of the Centre [are] attended to in less than three minutes". Recent internal survey-based research found that 95.3% of customers were satisfied with the service they received at the centre, while 97.6% thought the centre was easy to use (City Council's website).

The relationship between the City Council and its customers is being supported by the *LAGAN Frontline for Local Government CRM* solution. This is being implemented as part of a phased programme; the first phase to manage face to face interactions, the second in connection with call-centre contact, and finally to manage self-service channels (City Council's IEG 2002, p.30). The restructuring of front and back office functions also entails making use of 'Case Based Reasoning' (CBR) and 'Scripting'; "a detailed step through of the Council's processes will be provided to customer service agents through scripts and CBR, enabling generic staff to provide a first class service to customers and freeing time of specialist officers for tasks that require their considerable skills" (City Council's website).

The level of progress towards becoming an e-organisation achieved by this council represents a useful socio-technical context from which to begin answering these key pilot study research questions: How, in practice, do those involved in delivering CRM-aided local e-government talk about service users? How are these discourses reflected in technologies, processes and practices? In short, how do those involved prefigure and configure their user? (cf. Woolgar 1991).

## 5. Data analysis

The interviewees were primarily selected on the basis of their association with the development of the Council's first CSC. They reflected differing levels of local authority experience, were based in a range of council departments and performed very different roles in relation to the CSC.

It was clear from the interviews that key arguments associated with the official support for customer service thinking, at a local and national level, and the logic attached to customer-focused changes, was being articulated by council employees at all levels – a pro-customer service discourse appeared to be truly embedded. A key aspect of these discourses is the notion that all service providing organisations, whether public or private, are compelled to strive for continual improvements in levels of customer satisfaction in order to meet rising customer expectations. Extending these ideas, a number of respondents saw that a key challenge for local authorities such as this council was to attain levels of customer service in line with the private sector. A generic officer stated how;

*"...at the end of the day, people expect good service,... we're being brought up, not to the same level as probably the private sector, but they're getting there slowly but surely, and I think people, the way they are now, they expect a high level of service no matter where they are, in any walk of life really, isn't it? Whether they're hiring a car or coming into the council, it's all changed" (28/5/03)*

Moreover, the achievement of customer satisfaction is perceived to be the most important, if not the only, outcome from the citizen-customer's perspective, as well as that of the CSC:

*"If their enquiry's being dealt with more efficiently, and a lot more quickly than what it used to be...I mean surely that's what it's all about....And CRM that's gonna help us do that hopefully. At the end of the day if you're going anywhere*

*you expect a good level of service and if you go in there [the CSC] and you're getting somebody who's well trained, who knows what they're talking about and you're dealt with quickly and efficiently, that's all you want, it doesn't matter where you go, whether it's a bank, a council, anywhere, that's all you want isn't it?"* (Generic Officer. 28/5/03)

Could it be that the career history of the CSC staff interviewed accounts, in part, for their positive customer service attitude? A number of the Centre staff spoken to, including management, had worked in Customer Service Centres (serving banking or domestic energy customers) or other private sector industries in customer-facing roles. It is clear that this is not purely coincidental; management reported that the Centre's recruitment process strongly favours customer-oriented applicants. During a training session on their first day at work, generic agents were told by the Centre management; "We know you've got the customer service skills we're looking for" (CSC Manager 27/5/03).

It is reasonable to assume that another factor would be the existence and level of customer service training provided to CSC staff, especially as many of the trainers have a private sector background. According to a senior member of the training team, the effectiveness of the Centre's recruitment process makes the trainer's job that much easier;

*"...certainly the people that we've had on the programme are not your normal employees in terms of .....They are certainly have been appointed based on their personality, so in that way [the training] is relatively straightforward..."* (18/6/03)

What might the implications of these attitudes be for the citizen experience and the shape of the e-citizen? Logically, one of the outcomes, the desired outcome from the local authority's viewpoint, would be an improvement in the quality of service received by the customer-citizen. Could it also be that the necessarily individuating nature of customer service initiatives in the public sector involve a

level of disregard for public officials' duty to exercise "...sensitivity to the complexity of the public interest..." (Johnson 1983, pp.193-4 in du Gay 2000, p.94), or what might be termed the 'social customer'? And do these discourses posit the e-citizen as little more than a 'customer' in the conventional sense?

Wary of the idea that, prior to the dawn of the new public management agenda, individuals behaved in a wholly civic-minded manner in their dealings with government bodies, could it be that recent changes endorse, indeed champion, an individualistic, perhaps also a passive, mindset through emphasising the legitimate rights, demands and expectations of the sovereign customer?

Building on these arguments, Fountain (2001b) stated that "the customer satisfaction metaphor ignores and weakens the critical roles of representation and trusteeship intrinsic to both public officials and the public" (p.71). On this, during a discussion about how the public are, or should, be referred to within local government, a member of CSC staff, at the time working on CRM Scripting processes, stated;

*"I don't really like 'citizen'. I think it's very much...part of old-school type language. I know it's starting to come back into context now, a lot more people are talking about it. But, no, I don't like that idea, it sounds too political to me. And I just think, to the little old lady who comes into here to pay her bills with her pension, she doesn't want to be a citizen, she wants to be a customer. She's not bothered about what she's really called. But, I'm sure if you asked them, they would all see themselves as customers, because that's the language everybody, more or less, is coming up with isn't it?"* (16/6/03)

How widespread this attitude might be within this council ('front' and 'back' office) or within local government more generally is unclear at this stage of the research. Many interviewees told of how, when the Council began implementing a customer service agenda, there were varying levels

of commitment to the project within the authority. Talking about those council employees who were expected to deliver the re-shaped services, a CRM Project Manger told of how

*"...there was a big sort of cultural change to get through so there was a lot of work involved in getting the buy into that, persuading people that this would work..."*  
(7/5/03)

Beyond the CSC, the Council's website reports that "...the biggest single issue heavily spotlighted by staff in 2001 was a frustration with some non-Centre based Council Officers failing to embrace the concept or practicalities of the Customer Service Centre with enthusiasm and professionalism". The same website goes on to claim that "this issue has clearly been resolved, largely, it would seem, as a result of a change in the temperament of directorate based Officers themselves".

A number of interviewees offered a somewhat different account, suggesting that there were certainly still council staff who did not share a customer-centric mode of thinking. Even among CSC staff, reported a member of the Council's 'transformation team', it is possible to discern an element of tension between what might be termed the 'modernisers' (us) and the 'traditionalists' (them);

*"Team meetings were a nightmare, and they still prove to be from what I gather from the current supervisor, because again, older school staff that are still there..."* (16/6/03)

Whether a 'counter-discourse' of some description may be operating is unclear at this stage. From the interviews, it would certainly seem that resistance to change, particularly in the early stages of the project, was often motivated by concerns over potential job losses. Another possible site of conflict is the fear of expertise being transferred from the back office to customer-facing staff. Now whereas it is expected at the current stage of modernisation that the most complex of customer enquiries will be passed to back office staff by frontline agents, there are signs of tension between the two camps. Discussing areas of potential friction, one

interviewee said of the Council's back office staff;

*"they're...very conceited and think that nobody else on this planet can do their job like they can..."* ('Transformation Team' Member 16/6/03)

Although the issue was not given a great deal of prominence during this initial study, it would appear that the main sources of resistance to change by back office staff have been motivated by these more self-interested concerns than ideological considerations. This is assuming, of course, that the kinds of concerns articulated by du Gay (2000), Fountain (2001b) and others are indeed shared by any public officials. This is certainly a potentially significant issue in terms of the nature of the relationship between customer-citizens and local government, and one which future research will pursue with greater intent.

Alongside the importance of customer service, key aspects of current management philosophy applicable across all sectors are organisational adaptability and a general willingness to embrace change, features not readily associated with governmental organisations. Bearing in mind that the attitude of the workforce is a vital factor in organisational change processes, it is noteworthy that the research participants exhibited distinctly pro-change signals. And it is equally clear that this kind of attitude is desired, perhaps even demanded, by CSC management. Addressing newly recruited generic officers, a member of the management team was unambiguous about the centre's approach to change:

*"Change is about..."*

- *being passionate, innovative and creative*
- *encouraging a positive attitude towards change*
- *breaking down cultural and organisational barriers*
- *equipping, supporting and empowering staff*
- *turning strategies in practice*

*...to deliver the best possible service to our customers"*  
(27/5/03)



At the heart of local e-government's customer service agenda are the ICTs which it is envisaged will support the reengineering of organisational processes around the customer; this council, as explained above, is rolling-out a CRM solution. One of the key findings in respect of interviewees' attitudes to the new technologies was how all of them advanced similar opposing discourses; the first rehearsing the inadequacies of the previous systems (i.e. onerous, time-wasting, generally ill-suited to the CSC's purposes) and the other promoting the merits of CRM (i.e. time-efficient, integrated, customer-focused and so on). Despite the broad enthusiasm, it became clear that some of the more experienced officers, who were used to working with the old mainframe system (this was still in operation at the time, though was due to be phased out), tended to still prefer to use the mainframe for certain transactions because they found it more time-efficient to do so.

Although the data strongly suggest that the technological reorganisation has been broadly welcomed, there are a number of CRM-related issues which it would be useful to explore in terms of the potential implications for the citizen-customer's experience. These refer, in particular, to the 'Process Service Mapping' initiatives that, through the medium of 'scripts', form the basis of generic officers' interaction with customers. Process Service Mapping is defined by the Council as:

*"...the systematic method in which the diagnostics of expert knowledge is transferred into flow diagrams. In its most simplistic format – it is the 'mapping' out of questions and responses that an expert would ask to a given enquiry, enabling generic staff to follow the same process with little or no previous knowledge on a subject"* (City Council's website).

First of all, as CRM solutions are applied to an increasing number of local authority service areas, generic officers are expected to handle a greater diversity of enquiries. Although it was clear that front-line agents here were not necessarily expected to deal with *all* customer queries, there appeared to be a danger that

mapping and scripting processes could be viewed by back offices as a method of lightening their workload and/or cost-cutting. A member of the 'Transformation Team';

*"I'm very very cautious about what I want the [front-line] staff to do through the scripting process and I work with the departments as well, because some of them are very much 'Ok, just give them everything'; others, as I said before, don't want anybody to do anything at all, but once they get underway with the process, some of them really are, 'Ok, well they can do everything, they can take the enquiries on all of this...'"*  
(16/6/03)

If this represents an accurate reflection, might there be detrimental effects for customer-citizen in terms of the quality of the interaction? A response to this issue very much rests on how a further series of questions are addressed. These include; To what extent can the mapping and scripting processes truly model conventional interactions between citizens and expert public officials? Can tacit knowledge be truly apprehended by these processes? In this regard, one interviewee, with many years experience of handling council tax enquiries, had been involved in a mapping exercise and voiced some concern at the difficulty of capturing what is often a very complex process.

Furthermore; To what extent do the nature and quality of customer-agent communications depend on the knowledge and approach of the official involved in the mapping exercise? How easy is it to ensure that current knowledge is reflected by the maps/scripts? Do generic agents have the skills to deal with particularly sensitive issues (For example, process maps concerning the delivery of meals to a customer's home may involve broaching some rather sensitive health issues and dealing with potentially vulnerable customers. Or those dealing with re-housing may entail domestic violence, child protection, or harassment issues)? Satisfactory answers to these questions require further empirical research.

## 6. Concluding remarks

The data generated by this pilot investigation into the world of a local e-government Customer Service Centre largely reflects a world where the rationale for organisational change is accepted, new CRM technologies are welcomed and the people being served are first and foremost, 'customers'. Moreover, this is a world shared by managers and customer-facing staff alike. Following the work of Rose and Miller (1991), it is argued that this discursive domain is helpful in beginning to build a picture of what it might mean to be an e-citizen.

The data also raise a number of issues relevant to local e-government policymakers and practitioners. Among these, the question of whether the public sector 'customer' adequately encompasses the richness and complexity of the relationship between the state and its public, where the twenty-first century citizen adopts multiple roles? For example, the end user may play the 'individual' roles of *paying customer, beneficiary and obligatee* (see Alford 2002), or, on another level, the 'collective' roles of, say, *voters and taxpayers*. Reflecting on very similar issues, Andrew Gray and Bill Jenkins (2002) suggest that

*"...the idea and practice of public service and its users are significantly more complex than in the past and certainly more than is currently understood by those who design and deliver our services" (p.252).*

At a practice level, Fountain (2001b) is particularly troubled by the prospect of market segmentation strategies discernible within the current US e-government approach to public service delivery: "Service delivery agencies routinely serve a variety of target populations, but differentiation of service levels according to customer segments places agencies on a slippery slope, leading easily to political inequality" (pp.62-3).

Concerned with the e-governance implications of similar initiatives for citizens, politicians and public servants in a Dutch context, Ignace Snellen (2002) raises some interesting practice-related issues concerning the changing status of

the 'street-level bureaucrat' which may resonate with the rise of the UK local e-government generic officer which the data point toward. Snellen finds that, as a consequence of the intensive deployment of decision-making ICTs, the street level bureaucrat (or 'infocracy') has been simultaneously empowered and downgraded. And as far as citizens are concerned, "...the changing position of the street-level bureaucrats is of direct importance for their relationships with the executive parts of public administration. On the one hand, their dependency on the discretion of public professionals is reduced...On the other hand, as the positions of the street-level bureaucrats within the organisation are downgraded, they may be less able to represent the interests of their clients with the higher echelons of the organisation" (p.195). Further potential implications of internal changes relate to the earlier-cited findings that conflict may exist between front and back office workers, and that the benefits of modernising trends may not be shared by all. This scenario could be interpreted as a lack of alignment between the network of actors representing local e-government, with obvious implications for the project's success.

On a less practical level, du Gay (2000) has pointed to the strong ethics of the traditional bureau and suggested that "the focus on 'customer satisfaction'...in the context of public sector management...seems constitutionally surprising, hierarchically anomalous and, furthermore, potentially dangerous" (p.109). Engaging with similar issues, and mindful of the very different objectives and responsibilities associated with public and private institutions, Fountain (2001b) fears that the quest for customer satisfaction may substantially impoverish the roles of the government agency and the citizen as perceived by those actors: "Paradoxically, emphasis on the citizen as a consumer of services and focus by agencies on the identification and aggregation of individual preferences may weaken perceptions and understanding of the fundamental obligations of citizens and public servants" (p.71).

Importantly, there is little empirical evidence to date of how these issues are conceived, debated and addressed in practice. In this respect, our pilot study

represents a useful glimpse into the 'enactment' of customer-focussed technologies in a public sector setting. Clearly, the black box of CRM-supported ICTs in local e-government settings needs opening significantly further, so as to 'expose' decisions corresponding to the design, deployment and procurement of these systems, in addition to their implementation. Further research will seek to do this.

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