



UK opens door to electronic services



Who goes there?

by Melanie Collison

To calm a citizenry skittish about its privacy, the UK government has been ostentatiously careful in launching its services online. It is equally cautious about introducing smart cards, “a thorny subject in the UK,” says Graham Harrop, the Microsoft Corp. services manager responsible for rolling out “the Gateway concept” across the world from his base in the United Kingdom. “There is this feeling of Big Brother about a national ID card.”

“Gateway” is Microsoft’s electronic gatekeeper that authenticates a user’s identification and acts as a clearing-house for all citizen and business transactions with government. The UK Government Gateway (gateway.gov.uk) was launched in January 2001.

To be entered into the system and get a user account, a citizen or business provides “known facts” to Gateway – name, address, and possibly an email address –

then chooses a password. To protect security, the individual must receive hard copy confirmation before enrolling for the various services.

Gateway uses the “known facts” to identify each person through the back-end systems of government in the same way it had previously been done by human hand. “Authenticating a user is the most complicated part of the system,” to ensure people don’t have unauthorized access to anyone



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sharing, it builds a second line of security defence. Gateway does not provide a single point of entry to all government systems. "It is not a real time system; it is entirely asynchronous. A hacker cannot in real time hack through to the other end. [Gateway] gives the appearance of being 24/7, but just holds everything until the system is turned back on 9 to 5. Security is a byproduct of uncoupled architecture." An extra bonus is the structure provides the convenience of full-time access for the lower cost of 9 to 5.

The central UK government is working towards having all transactions on line by 2005, for 60 million citizens and three million businesses which deal with 200 central and 482 local government institutions in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, in both English and Welsh. To coordinate the electronic production of the required forms, 13,000 in all, Microsoft uses XML (extensible markup language), the universal format for structured documents and data on the Internet. Servers in each department ensure once-only delivery and manipulate the data into the format required by each department.

The first phase of the UK Government Gateway includes income tax, similar to payroll deductions, customs and excise value-added tax collection, like Canada's Goods and Services Tax, and Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food subsidy claims. The goals are to reduce the number of forms citizens are forced to fill out, and to stop various parts of government work-

The 2005 deadline to be completely online is supported by financial incentives for local governments. However, local governments are dragging their heels, perhaps partly because the population is only about 40 percent online. Every school in the UK is online, connected at government expense, but there's a long way to go in the general populace, who dial up primarily at work. They could write off the cost of a home PC, but access is iffy. "One of the big issues of communications infrastructure is that there are rural parts that will be an awful long time before they get reasonable bandwidth. Wireless is quite expensive," Harrop says.

More growth will come when smart cards are introduced, which Harrop thinks will be fairly soon. "Research shows if you can tie the ID to some significant benefit, it is much more accepted. Work is going on around the health service to introduce smart cards so you have some sort of health record, or at least your personal demographics on the card. That would get around the problem that if you turn up out of your own region the hospital doesn't know anything about you." The implication that having a smart card will ensure a higher level of service may encourage people to accept them.

Excited by the credibility Microsoft has established, Harrop says establishing the UK Government Gateway "changed the perception of Microsoft in government and proved some things about our technology." Beyond the UK, the IT giant is working on

else's data, Harrop says. "If you're a patient and want to view your own treatment record or the future path of your care, [the government] needs to know when you open that data up, that the person accessing it is who you say you are."

"At no time does government build a super database of information about you," Harrop says. "People are *very* sensitive about privacy issues. Government Gateway does not make any linkage with the back-end systems. A data protection registrar, similar to Canada's Privacy Commissioner, signs off on the system to ensure it does not breach anyone's confidentiality. This role is filled by somebody who believes absolutely in citizen rights."

In a telephone interview from London, Harrop explained that because Gateway provides a messaging framework, not data

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ing at cross purposes. "We would tax people who don't earn very much money, then another department would give them some sort of benefit. The effort is to integrate those two so we don't take money off them in the first place," Harrop says.

Gateway can differentiate access for officials. "It can apply rules according to who is authenticated, what role they're in," Harrop explains. The newfound electronic efficiency is already squeezing savings out of the system into government coffers, but departments are reluctant to publicize how much for fear of budgets cut, Harrop says.

several Gateway pilot projects with varying degrees of success. "Generally the concept is very well received, but the translation into different environments takes quite a long time," Harrop says. Some regions of Germany are showing interest, Egypt will probably not follow through on its pilot because its rate of Internet usage is low, and a pilot project is about to begin in Romania. *MM*

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