from the guest editor

A S THIS *SUMMIT* "Focus on IT" section debuts, it looks like dark days for information technology procurement, at least according to the headlines. At the national level, it seems impossible to contain the costs of big spends or get them done on time (the gun registry and the Canadian Automated Air Traffic System, among others), to get agencies and departments on the same page for projects of national importance (see the November 2003 Auditor-General's report on Government On-Line), or even to keep track of millions of dollars in purchases (Department of National Defence alleges IT procurement invoice fraud and demands $159 million repayment from computer company).

Apologists will say that even private sector IT projects have an unacceptable failure rate, but that is hardly an excuse. At worst, private companies waste their shareholders' money, not the taxpayers' money. With elaborate mechanisms to ensure that buying is fair, open and transparent, governments should be doing better, not worse. For most categories of goods and services, those systems work well. Unfortunately, when it comes to large IT projects, the system all too often fails.

In subsequent editions, we will follow this developing story with coverage of government IT projects large and small, documenting the successes along with the setbacks, and pointing out the opportunities along with the pitfalls. The IT industry looks to government as a key customer, while government looks to information technology as a means to transform its operations and renew its relevance to citizens. Everybody has to live with the results.

We launch this section of *Summit* with an overview of electronic voting and a feature on information technology public-private partnerships, both of which are still very much works in progress; we look at a content management solution that can help governments structure information for multiple uses; and we introduce an innovating Canadian company whose products will soon parachute high-tech payloads to remote corners of the earth.

Looking forward to your comments.

Richard Bray

E-voting X

by David Eadie

O N THE FACE OF it, the advantages of applying electronic technology to the voting process seem obvious. Its supporters are quick to point out that electronic voting – either by phone, Internet or polling booth voting machines – allows for virtually instant accounting and encourages greater voter participation.

Needless to say, some of the main supporters of e-voting are the hardware and software companies who stand to make a good deal of money. For example, Riverside County, California spent nearly $14 million on 4,250 machines for 714 precincts in the fall of 2000.

But there are problems. In a recent California election, the Caltech-MIT Voting Technology Project found that electronic voting machines lost nearly as many votes as paper ballots. Opponents of e-voting include voters' groups (some of whom brought a court challenge against voting machines in California for installing uncertified software) and high-tech critics such as William Arbach, a University of Maryland assistant professor of computer science who participated in a recent study investigating the security of voting machines used in Maryland. "We could have done anything we wanted to," he said. "We could change the ballots (before the election) or change the votes during the election," said Arbach.

E-voting by Internet poses even greater problems. In the absence of paper ballots, which can be traced and verified, there's no way to be certain about how votes are counted. In February, the Pentagon's plans to introduce the Secure Electronic Registration and Voting Experiment for overseas voters was dropped amid security concerns raised by the group the Pentagon had hired to review it. One of the writers of the report, Barbara Simons (a past president of the Association of Computing Machinery) says that at this time, Internet security is not sufficient to ensure that fraud and online criminal acts won't affect US elections. "It's possible in the foreseeable future that it will be safe to vote on the Internet, but it may never be."

Internet voting also fared poorly (last on a list of three options) in a 1998 report on e-voting commissioned by Elections Canada. Voting by telephone was considered best suited to fill the security, accuracy and secrecy requirements necessary to sell the idea to politicians. Changes to election procedures must be legislated and at present provincial and federal lawmakers appear to be reluctant to do away with paper votes. Municipally, the picture is quite different. In Ontario, for example, individual municipalities are free to set their own rules and some, like Markham, have included e-options such as Internet voting. Election officials across Canada are watching these developments with considerable interest but are taking a cautious approach. Insiders suggest that e-voting is at least five years away. ⋀

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