

GATEWAY TO FAILURE

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Before it even launched the government's Gateway project was dogged with controversy and the problems continue to persist. Almost exactly two years since LinuxUser & Developer first highlighted the Gateway's discrimination against non-Microsoft users, David Chan has shown that the government still hasn't learnt its lesson. We have the equivalent of only being able to pay your tax with a Barclaycard – other forms of payment just won't work. But of course if that was the case it would be plainly ridiculous; every bank, opposition party and pressure group would be screaming blue murder over Barclays having an unfair advantage.

Instead we have something a little more technical but no different in its outcome, XML signatures which don't quite comply with the open standards they claim to adhere to, forcing those wanting to use the Gateway for its intended purpose to rely on Windows-only libraries. This isn't about Microsoft per se, this is about the Office of the e-Envoy (OeE) continuously mouthing a commitment to openness and avoiding vendor lock-in while doing the exact opposite. They seem to be drinking their own kool-aid as government websites repeatedly claim that the Gateway complies with open standards, people in government appear to believe it complies yet we know that XML signatures, vital to the most useful aspects of the Gateway, do not comply.

Admittedly OeE have had tight deadlines to meet, in March 2000 Blair pushed forward the online service delivery target from 2008 to 2005. This may be why draft standards were used, but doesn't explain why the implementations don't even comply with those drafts. Nor does it justify why two years after the launch aspects of the system, such as canonicalisation, are undocumented. If we're lucky we may get a fix by next year; but if this was a Barclaycard situation we'd be looking for a fix tomorrow.

The official Open Standards policy states that "Government will only use products for interoperability that support open standards and specifications in all future IT developments" yet we see Microsoft-only libraries being used at the core of the Gateway's interfaces. Not only does this give Microsoft-based developers unfair advantages in accessing a public system for their clients but it totally violates the government's own policy. It seems that, in our government, the rules of fairness and openness, which all civil servants are supposed to aspire to, just don't seem to apply to technology.

Why does this keep happening?

Here's what we know about the Gateway...

Compaq were originally contracted to build the Gateway and actually began work in June 2000 but by September they had pulled out due to disagreements with OeE over the licensing of the systems built and who would own the intellectual property rights. By this time £5.6 million of tax-payers' money had already been frittered away, though £2.2 million of hardware found other uses around government.

Deadlines loomed over the stalled project but alternatives were made available to OeE. A secondee from Microsoft had started work at the Cabinet Office (the department OeE is a part of) on 13th December 1999. Around March 2000 Steve Ballmer and Neil Holloway, Microsoft's UK Managing Director had a 'highly successful' private meeting with Patricia Hewitt (then the e-commerce minister) and the then e-Envoy, Alex Allan. The Microsoft secondee (the only we're aware of, but OeE don't disclose them willingly) returned to the mothership on 21st July 2000. No prizes for guessing who got the contract.

As the Compaq deal unravelled OeE began negotiating with other suppliers. One contact at a major supplier who had been approached for the project is so furious about the whole process and resulting mess that he is unable to bring himself to form complete sentences on the matter. All suppliers that I have spoken characterise bidding for OeE projects as the worst procurement exercises they have ever experienced (perhaps with the exception of the last two years' e-voting pilots which left suppliers with two months to deliver the systems).

As Compaq left the scene, so did the e-Envoy, Alex Allan, citing 'family reasons' on 5th September. By 1st October Sema were working with Dell, Cable & Wireless, Halycon and Viacode to build the gateway. But, despite their usual reluctance to prime contract, Microsoft were leading the project using their best people and latest server products throughout. Sema valued their one-year support contract at £10 million, we've been unable to discover the values of other contracts signed.

By March 2001 the Gateway was preparing for launch. So were black-hats who cracked several related OeE sites including govtalk.gov.uk defacing the sites and highlighting lax security on the web servers. But OeE grandees were probably too busy to get overly worried about this as a few days later they jetted off to the Microsoft Government Leaders Conference in Seattle. OeE folks enjoying Microsoft hospitality included Bob Evans, programme director for UK Online; Alan Mather, Government Gateway project manager; Andrew Pinder, the new e-Envoy; Jamie Rentoul, Performance and Innovation Unit in the Cabinet Office and Ann Steward, director of e-Government. Of course the never shy Microsoft announced their work on the Gateway during the conference with the help of the e-Envoy who also gave choice quotes for a press release. The release is entertaining as it highlights Microsoft Consulting Services' ability to build such a major project in only 15 weeks using open standards on Windows 2000, .NET and so on. Open standards and XML are repeatedly bandied about, can they be serious?

Apparently so, in fact the e-Envoy was so happy about it all that he appeared in another Microsoft press release in April 2001 praising his favourite technology company. The competition didn't take it lying down though, Sun's Scott McNealy stormed into Britain saying that OeE had been carrying on "like a dope fiend" using Microsoft's .NET for the Gateway when it was in fact a "dot NOT" option. Even more independent voices including the Meta Group began to pipe up in May with warnings that vendors could take control of the Gateway if OeE insisted on using proprietary systems just to meet deadlines. Looks like they were right, who'd have thunk?

By this point however the Government had stopped even being embarrassed about it all. On 29th May 2001 Tony Blair spent an hour at Microsoft's UK headquarters to launch Labour's business manifesto and push Windows XP so blatantly that even the Tories criticised the event's crass commercialism. Only the following month did the problems with accessing the Gateway begin to emerge into the FLOSS community. But this wasn't a problem in OeE's world, Steve Ballmer and the e-Envoy leapt onto a stage together at the Digital Britain Summit before becoming 'official Microsoft partners' on 29th August 2001, it's almost touching. The romance continued in early April 2002 when a junket of OeE staff jetted off to another Microsoft Government Leaders Conference, but perhaps they should have been watching their backs. On 25th April the National Audit Office published a report criticising OeE for failing to calculate any return on their investments. In other words 244 staff and an annual budget of £52 million (at the time) was being spent with no measurements or indications of whether it was delivering value. Is it any wonder that there are strong rumours that the department is due for the chop?

When we have such blatantly cosy relationships with suppliers found guilty of anti-competitive practices, when we see the government contradicting its own policies and as long as we still get replies to consultation submissions as blank emails with Word documents attached we have the right to doubt the Government's ability to deliver a single technology project. Until the citizens become more important than the suppliers we are going to see these stories continue, as they have done for the last twenty years of Government IT projects.

It's high time the government began to go on rehab and kick the proprietary addiction. Even in the rare situations where FLOSS can't offer a solution, open interoperability standards can protect the government (and thus tax-payers) from lock-in and extortionate pricing. The dope-fiend needs to stop talking about shunning its dealers and being open, it has to be open. The addiction stops here.

++ Glossary

OeE – Office of the e-Envoy

FLOSS – Free/Libre Open Source Software

++ Jason Kitcat researches e-government and e-democracy issues. For more visit www.free-project.org