

# Looming IT disaster?

I have just finished reviewing chapter four of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) document 'Universal Credit: Welfare That Works', and it makes interesting if not frightening reading. Chapter four details the delivery of Universal Credit and the proposed IT and online mechanisms that will be in place for people to claim this new all encompassing benefit. Now I must be positive about this, as for a long time I have been banging the drum for government to use and utilise technology, especially the internet and online services. However, my optimism is somewhat dulled by the complexity of what is being proposed.

Don't get me wrong, online, interactive services are the way forward, but they normally replace a well trodden path of manual claiming for a single benefit or other face to face activity. However, here the Universal Credit is all about consolidating 30 state benefits, which at present have many and varied access channels by which citizens can claim.

Let's face it, central government's track record for implementing large and complicated systems is not great. We only have to look at the recent income tax debacle, where citizens were either over or underpaid by significant amounts due to the implementation of a new income tax IT system.

In early 2010 the chairman of the Public Accounts Committee publicly lambasted the then Labour government for "departmental IT projects that were over-ambitious, overly complex and failed to deliver what is promised while costs rocketed."

One of the worst more recent examples is the £7.1 billion Defence Information Infrastructure (DII) project, which was designed to replace hundreds of different

computer systems within the MoD with a single system that would be used by the army, navy and air force, as well as the MoD itself. This project is running more than £180 million over budget, and is 18 months late. Does this sound familiar?

The Universal Credit is also going to utilise the HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) proposed real time information system to identify earnings and to calculate the net Universal Credit payment due by applying the appropriate taper to the gross payment. The only problem here is that there is already slippage in the real time information system being developed for the HMRC. Whether the HMRC system can deliver what is required for the Universal Credit is yet to be agreed. But what is clear is that Universal Credit is heavily dependent on the success of the HMRC system. The worst thing you can hear when developing a system is the following three words – "can you just...".

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And these three words may have already been used in the form of "can you just integrate Universal Credit please?" Adding to or changing a project is termed 'scope' or 'project creep', and is one of the main reasons for IT project failure. Integrating Universal Credit only complicates an already intricate and slipping project.



**Simon Bailey** considers how the new Universal Credit and IT are going to gel, and he predicts more than a few teething issues ■

However, one of the areas that I think will work really well is the digital first principle designed to meet the growing demand for flexible and comprehensive online services. For people making Universal Credit claims, notifying changes or checking their payments and responsibilities, the digital channel will be the primary contact route. I'm sure this is the best way, but there is a long way to go in educating those customers who don't use the online facilities already. We will have to see more detail on the proposed migration route from face-to-face and telephone contact to online self service.

Finally, as the system needed to administer Universal Credit which is meant to replace Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, Housing Benefit, Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance and Income-related Employment and Support Allowance and be available for people both in and out of work,

I can only start to wonder at the complexity of this IT project and the time constraints within it.

Don't worry though, as paragraph 12 of the 'Universal Credit: Welfare That Works' executive summary states that the systems for Universal Credit "would involve an IT development of moderate scale, which the Department for Work and Pensions and its suppliers are confident of handling within budget and timescale". That's alright then – I feel a lot more confident now!

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