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Don't cause more problems than you're trying to solve

In late 2019 there was a headline that caught my eye. It read, *'Benefits system automation could plunge claimants deeper into poverty.'* Surely automation is there to help claimants and not hurt them financially?

It appears that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is developing robots to work within the benefits system and it has been issuing tender documents that have requested assistance in building a system that could autonomously carry out tasks without human intervention.

It is reported that the DWP has hired nearly a thousand IT staff and is spending £8m a year on a specialist 'intelligent automation garage' which is developing a hundred robots for intelligent automation in the welfare system. The bots are being developed to review applications and, for example, ensure details about childcare and housing costs are accurate when those applications are being made.

The DWP has also created its own private technology company, called the Benefits and Pensions Digital Technology Services (BPDTS), which has recruited more than four hundred staff in the year to April 2019. The BPDTS is helping to transform and run more of DWP's digital services, using a full range of technologies and solutions – and it sees itself as part of the DWP team.

The DWP is seemingly building these robots for use in Universal Credit (UC), hoping that transactions will be handled more accurately and cheaply by using robotic process automation. Frank Field, the then chairman of the Commons Work and Pensions select committee, had his concerns and warned that vulnerable claimants *"will be left at the mercy of online systems that, even now, leave all too many people teetering on the brink of destitution"*.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that the DWP shouldn't develop automation, it just needs to ensure it doesn't cause more problems than it is trying to solve. There is a danger

that an increasing use of algorithms may leave vulnerable people being disadvantaged by the decision of an automated bot.

Let there be no doubt that central government does not have a particularly good track record on implementing new software. The government often announces amazing IT schemes but rarely do they meet the expectations publicised. You only have to look at IT schemes such as UC, which the Public Account Committee (PAC) identified as *'not value for money now and that its future value is unproven'*. GOV.UK Verify has also come in for criticism from the PAC, which identified the service as *'not fit for purpose'*, *'failing its users'* and had *'not delivered value for money'*. It will be interesting to see if the automation of welfare benefits will be any different.

Maybe lessons need to be learnt from the implementation of other major systems, such as the Real Time Information Programme (RTI). In the Post Implementation Review Report of RTI, some lessons for future system projects were highlighted, including the fact that the Impact Assessments heavily underestimated the additional time needed for employers and agents to get to grips with the new approach. It was noted that the Impact Assessments did not reflect the time taken to resolve issues where systems were not working as expected. HMRC also highlighted that it took customers and HMRC staff a long time to deal with issues such as these and this should be considered at the outset and planned for. I'm sure any major government software project will heed these lessons learnt.

The Chief Digital Officer for the DWP has highlighted that the Department is establishing a welfare system for the future. He stated that the bots *"don't make decisions regarding people's benefits. Instead they focus on everyday repetitive tasks so our colleagues can spend more time supporting vulnerable claimants face to face. Our use of machine learning is making the system simpler for*



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The rise of the 'bot' must receive a welcome, even if it's a cautious welcome ■

people, so, for example, it won't ask for more information than is necessary for straightforward claims such as childcare and housing."

It is not just the DWP that has a problem with automation – one local authority recently reported to members that its Risk Based Verification software was highlighting cases as high risk and therefore withholding payments and delaying claims. On checking the claims, the authority could not establish why the software had classified the claims as high risk.

In my opinion, provided that the DWP and local authorities acknowledge the lessons learnt from other system implementations, such as RTI, Verify and UC, then the artificial intelligence projects currently underway will provide for an effective automation of checks to income, etc. This can only be a good thing, especially if they uncover potential fraud, or they lessen administrative burdens for staff and claimants alike.

It is surely beneficial that many items, such as proof of income, etc., are no longer required and that bots automatically undertake the burdensome tasks, thereby allowing us humans to help those most in need. But automation needs to be implemented well and not to meet some financial savings deadline or political whim.

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