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The humble fax machine is still lurking in public service offices… and it shouldn't be! ▪

A matter of fax

Who remembers **Digital by Default?** It all started when Martha Lane Fox published a report called *'Directgov 2010 and beyond: revolution not evolution.'* The government responded to this report by highlighting that there would need to be a channel shift, resulting in public services being provided digitally by default. **Digital by Default** was supposed to transform public services by making them better and cheaper for taxpayers and more effective and efficient for the government. In 2012, Francis Maude, Minister for the Cabinet Office, emphasised this digital revolution by stating that the government were starting to deliver public services in a new way.

It is now nearly a decade since Martha Lane Fox's report and whilst things have moved on in the digital world, I was surprised to see that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) have not set any specific goals or a schedule for eliminating the use of fax machines! This amazing declaration was made in response to a written parliamentary question from Labour MP, Mark Tami.

eliminated from use by 31st March 2020.

The banning of faxes in the NHS was spearheaded by an **'Axe the Fax'** campaign led by the Leeds Teaching Hospital NHS Trust. The Chief Information Officer (CIO) for the teaching hospital likened the trust's reliance on archaic tech as **'living in the dark ages'**. Given that the Electric Printing Telegraph (fax machine) was invented by Scotsman Alexander Bain in 1842, the CIO is probably right.

It's not just the NHS that has taken action to remove fax machines – in 2017 Premier Inn was reported as removing fax machines from its sites.

One of the major concerns with traditional faxes is whether they have been sent to the right machine, been read by the right person and been acted upon. There are so many other secure communication methods, such as secure email, so it is difficult to see a strong argument to still use fax machines for businesses or public services.

For example, you wouldn't necessarily print out an email, but a traditional fax is just that - a paper copy

- there is no guarantee that the quality of the document you send will be replicated at the other end. The quality will be determined by the phone line and receiving machine
- the need to scan the fax in to get it on to a document management system or equivalent,

Personally, I can't remember sending a fax in the last twenty years. However, in some work environments, I occasionally see fax machines in use - but they normally just seem to churn out car leasing deals or adverts for workwear personalisation!

Obviously online electronic faxing has become more prevalent and this can remove some of the disadvantages of the traditional fax machine, but it can also leave some issues such as confidentiality, as the security of the receiving fax machine is unknown.

I was interested to see that many authorities still advertise fax numbers in their contact details. Whilst faxing peaked in the nineties, most companies have **moved with the times** and sought more customer friendly contact methods. As an example, I couldn't find a fax number for Amazon at all.

If you still use a fax, has your department or authority a roadmap for the removal of this humble machine?

Given that the **Digital by Default** agenda was a cornerstone of the government's drive to provide better services and become more efficient, it could be seen as disappointing that there are no plans to reduce the number or use of fax machines in the DWP. After a decade of digital progress or lack of it, perhaps Martha Lane Fox's report title should have read **'Evolution not Revolution!'**

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The response by the Minister for Employment was that "*the DWP does not currently have a set timetable in place to reduce [or] remove the ability to send and receive fax messages.*"

Considering it was the government's objective to **go digital** by default, it makes me wonder firstly why the DWP are still using faxes and secondly why there is no set timetable to remove or more importantly reduce their use.

This stance is made even more contentious given the fact that in December 2018 the then Health and Social Secretary banned fax machines across the National Health Service (NHS). The NHS were given just 15 months to become **'fax free'**, with the intention being that all faxes will be

Some disadvantages of using standalone fax machines include:

- the need for consumables for the fax machine such as paper, ink, toner, etc
- the requirement for a phone line with which to send or receive the fax
- *"send to many"* is not always possible, as it is often a single call to another fax machine
- the need to wait by the fax machine if somebody has sent you a confidential document. It's not easy to relocate the machine to a secure area or to the end of your desk
- it is not secure, as anyone can see the content of a fax that has been received on a fax machine
- they are not friendly to the environment.

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