

14 feature technology



OK COMPUTER?

I am relieved not to be using an IT system commissioned by social services to write this. Because if I was I'd be fighting my way through a barrage of tick boxes, drop down menus and forms to reach the end of this introduction. And even then I would have to send it through to a manager for approval before moving on to the second paragraph.

This, sadly, is the day-to-day experience for most social workers. They sit at their desks dumbfounded by their belligerent computers, wondering where they can get a mallet from. I wondered if I was alone in this sentiment, this desire to reduce every computer I worked with into a mass of shards of plastic. But asking around I haven't uncovered a single

A social worker happy with their IT system is almost an oxymoron. But why is this so, asks **Matt Bee**, and what's the solution?

social worker who is willing to say nice things about the software they use. Quite the reverse, in fact. Social workers almost queue up to give their computers a drubbing. "Why aren't they any good?" they ask.

That's what I wanted to find out.

But first let's dismiss this notion that social workers aren't IT savvy. These days that's just a myth. One care manager I worked with, when being trained on how to use a computer, wanted only to be shown where the off button was. "Don't you want to know more?" asked the IT trainer. "No," she replied, "that's plenty!"

But we're over that now. Most social workers

have smartphones, use Facebook, bank online and get their shopping delivered straight to their doorstep at the click of a button. And yet at work they're crippled by antiquated technology that mindlessly churns out forms and has to be told the same thing ten times, like an elderly relative, before it gets the point. The failing, then, isn't ours.

So it must be the computer's fault, right? Well, actually, no. Surprising as it may seem, there's actually nothing wrong with the software.

"This isn't simply about crap IT," Professor Sue White at Birmingham University tells me.

“It’s a lot more complicated than that.”

It’s a lot more tragic too. Professor White sends me a bundle of papers she’s co-authored outlining in detail where the problems with our lacklustre IT all began. They started with the death of Victoria Climbié in 2000 – a tragedy blamed on failures in communication and which, in turn, led to the creation of the Integrated Children’s System (ICS).

ICS, in concept at least, was no bad thing. The idea was simple. Local authorities all over the UK – in children’s services at first but later in adult’s services as well – would use the same kind of software to help them communicate better and work consistently. It’s important to note that ICS wasn’t a single computer system in itself, though. It was more a template, a sort of instruction manual written by the government, explaining how a social worker’s IT system should work. This they sent out to local authorities, along with a big wad of cash and a request they upgrade their computers.

Where it all went wrong was in the shambolic way ICS was implemented – something painstakingly detailed in one of the papers Professor White sent me called *When policy o’er leaps itself: The ‘tragic tale’ of the Integrated Children’s System*, published in *Critical Policy* in 2010.

First of all, the ICS working group – the people who would essentially dictate social work practice for years to come – had no social workers on it. They found space for 23 civil servants, four academics and three medical professionals, but no front line staff who would actually use the system in practice.

Then, when the system they designed turned out to be complex, awkward and unwieldy to use, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (who oversaw the project) ignored anyone who pointed this out to them. Front line practitioners told them; IT suppliers told them. Even the University of York told them in an independent study in 2006. The university went so far as to question whether ICS was fit for purpose at all – and what did the government do about it? They simply shelved the report and didn’t publish the findings. It would take another two years and a Freedom of Information request from a pressure group to force any of this out into the open – by which point those in charge simply dismissed the study as being largely irrelevant.

In the meantime, a flurry of shiny new IT

IN THE MEANTIME, A FLURRY OF SHINY NEW SYSTEMS SPARKED INTO LIFE ACROSS THE SOCIAL CARE SECTOR, ALL OF THEM INTENDED FOR SOCIAL WORKERS TO USE BUT NONE OF THEM DESIGNED TO HELP THEM DO THE JOB

systems sparked into life across the social care sector, all of them intended for social workers to use but none of them designed to help them do the job – something that became quickly apparent to anyone who logged on.

“It is no exaggeration to report that across our sites we found not one social worker, or manager, who was happy with the system...” was how another independent study from the time reported back, one that Professor White herself was involved in. She and her colleagues spent 240 days over five different worksites watching practitioners grapple with the new technology as it was being rolled out.

Was ICS really that bad? I ask Professor White.

Workflow process

“That bad and worse!” she replies.

“One PhD student I knew took over an hour to write up a five minute phone call because a child protection issue was mentioned, and even though it wasn’t relevant to the record she was trying to create, she still had to trawl through a whole different workflow process before being able to sign it off.”

Such stories will be familiar to anyone working in the field today. Our computer systems are designed to do this, to ensnare the user into a predetermined process and force them to do the job in a particular way.

Professor White recalls speaking to one software designer who told her: “We noticed that if a social worker can miss out a step, they will. So we make it so they can’t.”

Perhaps it was him who designed the software Lauren, an ex-colleague of mine, used in children’s services. She tells me her computer would practically lie down in the middle of the floor and throw a tantrum if she

tried to sign off an assessment with just a single case note still needing finalising (but, annoyingly, would never tell her which) or if she dared write a care plan for a child who needed one without also writing another three for the siblings who didn’t.

Lauren probably speaks for social workers everywhere when she says that IT makes her job harder, not easier. So what’s the point of it, then, I ask her.

She smiles. “To make sure we’re doing our jobs.”

And she’s right. Except our machines aren’t very good at that either. To save time, social workers have learnt to copy and paste freely, smearing the same information across multiple documents or missing out any section they can get away with. To avoid breaching timescales, managers have learnt to move cases from short to long assessments, from initial contact to review. Collectively we’ve all learnt together that the data these machines collect can be manipulated, bent over backwards and forced to fit whatever targets are required.

More to the point, the software has stopped tracking what we do and we’ve started following what it wants instead. We’re corralled by the machines (and our managers) into chasing targets.

Inputting data

Which kind of makes a mockery of the whole thing. I almost have sympathy for the government. After all, and let’s not lose sight of this, they’re just trying to make sure we do our jobs and prevent another Victoria Climbié.

The problem is, of course, we were all trying so hard not to have another Victoria Climbié that we walked headlong into the Baby P tragedy instead. Social workers were by now spending so much time at their desks, feeding the machine, inputting data, sharing it round, they didn’t have a chance to see their clients.

This didn’t escape the attention of the Social Work Task Force of 2009 (which, incidentally, Professor White took part in) or the Munro Review of 2011. Both were critical of the overbearing, heavily centralised management style that had come to rule the profession and, for that matter, the way the humble computer,

THE SOFTWARE HAS STOPPED TRACKING WHAT WE DO AND WE’VE STARTED FOLLOWING WHAT IT WANTS INSTEAD. WE’RE CORRALLED BY THE MACHINES INTO CHASING TARGETS

16 feature technology

a curious thing that had once sat in the corner of the room, ignored, had become some sort of altar to which we all now had to bow down. It was like a deity, as if displeasing it by letting an assessment fall overdue or a target slip gently out of kilter would bring the whole department crashing to its knees.

In the wake of Baby P the standardised forms were simplified, timescales were relaxed and, not long after that, ICS – the system that had sparked this whole thing off – ceased to exist. It was quietly canned.

So does that mean, I ask Professor White, that a local authority can design any IT system it likes these days?

She sighs. “Well, not really.” She suggests I type ‘Ofsted, Annex A’ into the internet and see what comes back. What comes back is a spreadsheet listing all the information a local authority has to provide on inspection. I count 173 different fields of data.

ICS might be dead but its legacy very much lives on. The government still wants its statistics and the computer is the means by which it can harvest them.

What we need, then, is a system that’s both easy to use and churns out the crucial data for Whitehall as well. It may sound ridiculous, but what we need is something like Facebook.

What is Facebook, after all, but a very sophisticated IT system – and one that does everything we need? The user can upload data, store historical records and refer across to other users. More to the point, sophisticated software in the background gathers a huge deluge of information from your account and sluices it back to California for Mark Zuckerberg to trawl through at his leisure. In many respects, Facebook is just a big information gathering tool but one that’s astonishingly easy to use. Why can’t we have something like that?

Time to speak to some IT companies. I contact three firms who supply software to local authorities to thrash out my Facebook idea. According to Pete Houselander, Services Director at Civica UK – a man with 15 years of

experience working in the field – the sort of data the government wants, let alone the quantity, makes the Facebook model more or less impossible. It’s too specific, too precise. Or to put it another way, we, the users, are too vague when typing away in a free text box. Our words can be interpreted in so many ways. So, for instance, we might refer to the same person as Ron, Ronnie, Mr Smith, Sam’s Dad, John’s brother, Jill’s next door neighbour... To a computer that could mean six different people, or one, and while there are some algorithms such as Soundex that can handle similarities there’s a whole industry in the making to administer all the combinations it would have to handle.

That’s why our computer systems use something Pete calls codifying, which I take to mean all those drop down menus and tick boxes. This forces you to drive the right data into the right places. It’s perfect for creating the sort of statutory reports the government craves and is the only way it can be done.

Voice recognition

So my hopes of bridging the gulf between Whitehall’s demands and social worker’s needs through clever technology appear to be dashed. But I’m not giving up.

What if we had a big sack of cash I ask Peter. Surely we would get a better IT system then. “You could have voice recognition, which lets you talk instead of type, and mobile technology, which lets you access the data on your phone or tablet, say, in a coffee shop, and portals that support information sharing across multiple agencies,” he replies. “All this stuff exists now. It’s just the price that holds it back. You’ll see a lot more of it in the coming decade or so.”

So we could invest a lot more money in IT. Or we could spend what we’ve got already more wisely. Local authorities commission their IT independently, but they all tend to flock to the same five major suppliers, ask for broadly the same specification, and get the same basic equipment in return. They do pay differing amounts, though. Freedom of Information requests reveal



they spend anywhere between £102,650 (Swansea) and £1.2 million (Edinburgh) according to the authorities that responded.

So why don’t local authorities just pool their budgets? Why not commission something once, for everyone, instead of hundreds of times over?

Bridgend County Borough Council is trying to do just that, leading a project to share IT with all the other local authorities and Health Trusts right across Wales. If it works, who knows where else it might lead?

Maybe we could one day have a national database. Maybe the barriers between social workers and better IT aren’t completely insurmountable.

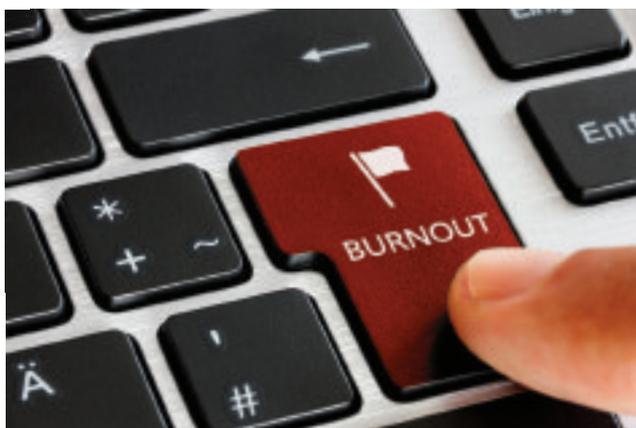
And that’s before we consider the open source project Professor White has been working on for the last five years. Her team is developing software that will first and foremost make the job easier – its primary purpose is solely to benefit the user. What’s more, her team wants to give it away for free to any council willing to help its workforce out.

So from an astonishingly awful start we are, perhaps, going to see some progress with our computer systems over the next few years. But that does depend.

It depends on something Peter mentioned, an old saying. It goes: ‘What gets measured gets done.’ From all the research I’ve done, even now, nobody – not the local authorities, nor the IT suppliers and especially not the government with its 173 measurements for everything else – measures whether social workers actually like the computers they use or find them helpful in doing the job.

When it comes down to it, this is what lies at the bottom of all our IT woes. This is the root of the problem. But it’s also, of course, the first step to a solution.

PSW



To have your views on this published in the next issue of PSW, please email editor@basw.co.uk