

Roll on 2011 and the e-Census

THE BUSINESS world may have grasped the Internet baton like an Olympic sprint team, so why is the public sector still stuck back at the school sports day egg-and-spoon race?

The true leader of the free world, Federal Bank chairman Alan Greenspan, is an ardent fan of technology. Its unprecedented boom over the past six years was fuelled in no small way by his acknowledgement of how much technology has improved business efficiency. And in spite of the current state of the tech-stock market, I fervently agree with him.

Last year, one in four Americans appointed George Dubya Bush as "official" world leader. Thankfully, he is almost as much pro-technology as he is pro-ol.

It is perhaps fortunate that

his proclivity for the death penalty hasn't extended to eBusiness.

And closer to home? Well, we have one of the world's most vibrant and exciting centres of technology innovation in Cambridge but a Government that appears to talk a good corner but is still rather short on delivery.

Preaching and being preached to is easy. Acting on those words is much more difficult.

So what about the practice? Our Government may have created an e-Minister and an e-Envoy, changed the name of the Central IT Unit to e-Government and staked itself to a date of 2005 for having its e-Government act together, but such gestures have a hollow ring to them.

If real progress continues to be slow, it will cost us all dearly.

Communicating electronically with our local Members of Parliament, surely, is the acid test. Some



**DAN
WAGNER**

of my more civic-minded employees recently established that only two-thirds of our Westminster MPs had a known e-mail address, 60 per cent of which were no longer active (that's the e-mails, not the politicians).

Even the facility to send a fax to your MP has been removed from the official

Government site, although thankfully it can still be done via e-mail on www.faxyourmp.com.

This is an independently financed site that turns your e-mails into faxes, sending them straight to your local member of parliament.

It's good of this publicly minded website to keep our democracy democratic, but it seems a back-to-front way of using the Internet to me.

The current Census that we as worthy citizens are happy to participate in, is a classic example of a missed electronic opportunity.

A 10-page document delivered by post to 35million homes; stop for a second to imagine the time and money that could be saved, not to mention the forests and leather on the soles of our postmen's boots had this census been conducted electronically.

No replacement forms would be required when we'd forgotten to include our latest offspring, perhaps in

the forlorn hope that he might suddenly grow up and leave home.

And this electronic data could be collated instantly, unlike the current effort which takes nine months to gestate.

Why wasn't this census online? Around 37 per cent of UK households are online and 90 per cent of office workers have access to the web at work.

At least half of us could have filled it out online and saved millions.

Okay, it's too late for this one. But the next census is scheduled for 10 years' time and yet the official line from the Head of Census Processing is that "some aspects of the next Census may be put on the Net".

This is a dire indictment on an administration purporting to be in any way current. Ten years — at least that should be enough time to grow the 20 acres of trees needed for the booklets.

Sweden is light years

ahead of any other country in Europe with its Internet use. Concerning censuses, while it is more than happy to sell us the trees for ours, it contents itself with gathering exactly the same information from the ID cards that all its citizens carry.

Some people may be horrified at this, swapping government efficiency for privacy, but as a true e-vangelist, I'm all for it.

So, as an eternal optimist, I hope that in 2011 everyone will be in front of their flat screen terminals filling in the electronic census while watching EastEnders, and our elected officials will have the results by the time Ian Beale shuts up the caff.

I'm just afraid that I may get better odds on old Dubya dropping the death penalty and investing heavily in solar power.

● *Dan Wagner is CEO of Bright Station plc. E-mail: evangelist@brightstation.com*