

Written evidence submitted by Amit Bhagwat

Introduction

I began my background in planning and governing major programmes in multinational contexts (and others across large nations of multinational scale) in the 90s. Many of these programmes had varying degree of novelty and associated risks of unknown & unknowable. The approach I developed to planning and governing these was therefore a combination of accredited “maturity-building” within the organisation, often building on lessons learnt from the likes of US DoD, that have routinely needed to work on complex novel programmes, and systematically bringing down the complexity by thinking in terms of System of Systems, Iterative Delivery and Incremental Results of Value.

I first ventured into the UK public sector (and quasi-public sector) in context of a portfolio of programmes of the Royal Mail group and the DWP early-to-mid 2000. While my contribution was often across the programmes portfolio – in establishing the engineering, management and governance processes that could be used to deliver and communicate across the programmes portfolio, my work did not include scoping the programmes or writing the requirements – which sadly often preceded my involvement. It was clear to me that the programmes were often poorly scoped. The requirements were of poor quality (specificity, coverage, comprehensive scenarios consideration and flow, etc), clarity, dependency-mapping, non-functional considerations, procurement resilience, etc and I could often predict which programme was likely to run into difficulty because it had been scoped & contracted poorly and before a common mature delivery approach was institutionalised with requirement management scoped within the approach.

In 2006, I was retained to look into the then challenged NHS National Programme. Here I observed a number of weaknesses, beginning with name and image of the programme. What should have been effective and safe use of information and communication to connect & optimise health-care-wellbeing (which was eventually encapsulated, at least within the health domain, in the name Connecting for Health), began as “National Programme for IT” mistaking the means for the end. The quality of the contract schedules was not always high, the requirements were not only unclear but were quite weak, especially in the Non-functional domains (aspects like scalability, maintainability, availability, data currency, speed, etc). The requirements also included certain sections that were later tactfully tagged-out as “non-technical requirements” too vague to be taken forward through the development lifecycle. The programme was considered “pure programme office” activity, which not only demoralised the engineering teams involved but also gave very poor judgement of scope and complexity. Because whole monoliths of delivery were contracted out to service providers, little consideration was given to how the providers were likely to succeed, relying too much on success of the providers in delivery of earlier less complex programmes, rather than on objective assessment of the provider’s maturity and preparedness to deliver. Working with the national providers, I was able to design and institutionalise across the global supply web of the programme a transparent traceable delivery and reporting process amenable to National Audit Office Value for Money analysis which allowed the NHS Spine to be delivered at clear and fair public price. I however did not have the remit to fundamentally redraw the contract to address many of the early “ultimate public value” issues and I had no authority over local integration, which meant that even as the Spine services were ready, and often designed to fairly high standards, the local services were not connected to them for some time to come, leaving many local services operating on poor and unsafe platforms – a situation that was exposed a few years ago through the ransomware attacks and which, perhaps to a slightly lesser

extent, continues to this day, as many NHS organisations continue to use less safe and less capable platforms for conducting their business.

In the late 2000s, I had opportunity to conduct an Enterprise Architecture Maturity Appraisal across the DWP, analysing the capability/weaknesses within the strategy and support functions of the department in delivering changing needs of frontline services cost effectively and well, while keeping the systems maintainable, scalable, available, etc. There were a number of weaknesses not the least in inadequate traction between business and enabler domains, in varied maturity and standards within different services within the department, in too much emphasis on structures and too little on processes, in variable governance over business-as-usual and transformational processes, and in often a degree of disconnect between different teams and across different domains & services. In this case, I was able to offer the department a roadmap to address these issues. A number of elements in this roadmap were taken forward into the Government Digital Service, though a number of other elements remain unfulfilled, thanks especially to a succession of changes and crises – the financial crisis beginning in 2007/08, the parliamentary crisis/expenses scandal, the changes and uncertainties following from the 2010 election and coalition. Sadly, with the 2016 election, the dysfunctional parliament especially between 2017 and 2019, many of the issues have remained/grown, manifesting in many high profile failures and many more inefficient/sub-optimal deliveries highlighted in the NAO report. The government also appears very poor at maintaining a consistent mature approach to scoping and delivering programmes, even within tenure of a minister, let alone across ministers and premierships, suggesting a continued lack of overarching governance processes that would maintain clarity, consistency and continuity.

In the late 2000s, I also developed a Benchmark for Enterprise Architecture Maturity and the Beacon Architecture approach, which allows for looking over different horizons in context of different aspects of infrastructure capability. Sadly, neither political nor civil service entities have shown the ability to embed process maturity within the sector that would outlive individuals and would bring success through process design rather than through individual heroics.

September 2021

Process Maturity

What is Complex/Major – creating systems of systems, abstractions and interfaces to keep things simple

What is a Department – the political dynamics that fails frontline services from functions coherently and collectively

What is Public Sector – the proliferation of privatised public sector which often bring the worst of both worlds

Who is responsible – responsibility without informed ability – the bane of ministers and senior civil servants

More than Ministerial Judgement – how to introduce structures, processes, checks and balances that outlive ministers, premiers and parliaments

A bundle of promises – how to offer greater scrutiny and modularity of election manifestos, with ability to transfer modules across manifestos so what is promised to be delivered remains both deliverable and worth delivering

Holistic analysis of consequences – Cross-domain Impact and Unintended Consequences

Today's White Elephants and continued focus on Means over Ends

Westminster Restoration vs a Modern 21st Century Parliament

HS2 vs a well-connected, well-supplied nation