

Managing Information Systems in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:  
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*Question:* What is your educational background? How did you decide to work as an IS/IT professional?

*Answer:* I graduated from Reading University with a degree in mathematics and statistics. I was particularly keen to pursue a career around practical application of statistics and I joined the Government Statistical Service, and it was from there that I got involved in some of the early implementations of technology to support health. I was working for the Department of Health.



I got pretty hooked on IT at that point, but much less from the point of view of the technology itself and much more around what the technology potentially could do, it was the early advent of the PC, and I could see some massive opportunities for improved decision making through information management offered by PCs and new technologies.

And it was really from there that I got into technology, particularly in the public sector, and from there I moved into local government where there had been some quite exciting and innovative uses of technology over the years, and I really made my career in that area working for district and currently the county council here at Hampshire.

*Question:* What does your job entail? If you were to mention one way in which your job has changed over the last 10 years, what would it be?

*Answer:* My role has changed quite a lot, and I think I'm typical for most CIOs, heads of IT in organisations. 10 years ago I was spending a significant proportion of my time in technology strategy and operational technology matters, making sure networks run smoothly, response times are good, resilience is there.

I spend much less of my time now doing that. Typically technology does what it's expected to do. Many aspects of it are more likely a utility that you can depend upon. It's not to say there aren't operational issues around IT, but much more of my time now is spent looking at the practical application of technology to transform or change what we do. That's around things like customer service

improvement, driving our big efficiency programmes, as a source of business innovation rather than technology innovation, and in a sense I think that defines how the role of IT professionals has changed, and where in particular we need to see the training and development in universities, in schools and colleges develop as well.

*Question:* In what ways does e-Government contribute to a change in the interactions between local authorities and citizens? To what extent is the so-called “digital divide” an issue?

*Answer:* Technology is now pretty much fundamental to any business, whether it’s in the public sector or the private sector. It is hard to envisage many organisations, large or small, being able to operate without a dependence on IT.

Some of that may be purely a supplier chain management, being in touch with your customers and with your suppliers. It may be around the systems that automate what we do and make us more efficient, or it may indeed be direct delivery of services to the public, and increasingly in the public sector we are moving to delivering electronically. The term e-government is less used these days, but I know exactly what is meant by the term.

It is our ambition to use technology to enable our services to be available in ways which suit individuals and communities, in other words we design around their needs, and at times that also suit them, but if we’re going to be successful in moving our delivery channels from a more traditional face to face or telephone deliver to a web based delivery for example, we have to ensure that we are designing in a way that will maximise take-up, and we have to be aware of the barriers to doing so.

Digital inclusion is obviously an example of that, and many people still do not use the internet, they do not use technology for a whole range of reasons. Those reasons may be around access. Do I have good quality broadband in my rural area, for example? It may be the cost of technology, because whilst the price of a PC has fallen dramatically, households on average are spending more on technology, whether it’s the digital television, the mobile phone, the PC, the iPad or whatever it might be.

There are also issues in the way services are actually designed on the web. Are they as accessible around the needs of an individual or a community as they could be? And there are other fears that many people still have, which we need to be mindful of; their personal identity being stolen, for example if they’re going to do transactions online, or indeed some of the darker sides of the internet, and it’s really important for public services in particular to address that.

There is a real problem that we all face at the moment in having multiple identities in the way that we interact with electronic services. Now sometimes that is extremely helpful and more secure, so you use a different identity for doing certain secure transactions that you might use for renewing your library book for example, but in other areas it actually weakens security, because it is very difficult to maintain multiple passwords and it is very difficult as well for the individual to be in full control of their identity when they are interacting with those services.

And I would like to see a future where the individual has got that control. You maintain your portfolio of passwords and identities in a way that you choose and in a way that allows a join up between different services that you see appropriate to your needs. Now that might be that, I don't know, you're an older person, you need some support around adult social care, or it may simply be that you're doing banking online, but it should be your choice to allow your identity to be used across multiple different service areas as befits your personal needs and commitment to those services.

*Question:* If you were to mention one way in which Information Systems and ICT can make a difference and add value to the activities of a local authority, what would this be?

*Answer:* I think there are actually several ways in particular that technology has a key part to play right now in the changes that are facing the public sector and local authorities. One of those is around customer service. It is around providing better, simpler, quicker ways for people to get the service or the information that they need, and in particular putting them more in control of that interaction.

I think there is something else around joining up services, and the public sector is putting an awful lot of effort at the moment into a way in which we can hide the gaps that exist between different organisations that are supporting individuals. People talk about "I don't know whether it's my district council or my county council that provides a service, or indeed is it a government department, how does it all join together?"

Well technology can help to link those things together in a much more seamless way for the public. I think that's a real priority, and the third thing, which really flows from the first two, is around efficiency. If you use technology intelligently, and that means you don't just implement a system but you actually use the technology to change how you work and what you do, you free up frontline staff to be more productive and more flexible in the way that they work, but you're prepared to change your working practices as well, you can drive through significant efficiencies.

And to be honest, at the moment the public sector is under enormous pressure to find a lot of savings very, very quickly, and you can use technology to do that, but only if you are prepared to change traditional ways of working, and to compromise if necessary around the most efficient use of those technologies.

*Question: Finally, what are the career opportunities for Business/Computing Students in local authorities? What advice would you give to students who want to work as IS professionals in the future?*

**Answer:** I think we're seeing some changes in IT as a profession. In the past, IT as a profession was primarily dominated by technology. You became a network specialist, you worked in a computer centre, you might be a software engineer. Now those roles still exist but many of them have become automated, and many of them are in very specific business areas, so if you want to become a software engineer, your best bet is to join an industry that is a specialist in that, and there are a variety of them around. You can work for Microsoft or IBM, you can join one of the gaming industries or whatever. Within local authorities we still employ a large number of IT professionals, generally however in exploitation of technology.

So how can you use the sort of technologies that we all use? SAP, Oracle, Microsoft, you know, the list goes on. How can we use those in such a way that delivers the best possible service at the lowest possible cost? And that requires a degree of lateral thinking creativity; it requires particular disciplines around project management. Advocacy and communication skills are absolutely vital, and I'm always looking for people that bring a diversity of approach, knowledge, experience to IT, because that helps us to ensure that we're not inwardly looking at the technology, but we are outwardly looking and how we can support, in this case Hampshire County Council to deliver better services to the public.

I think it's a really exciting time. I think it's a really exciting role. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't. I've been particularly in local government now for, oh I don't know, probably the best part of 15 years, and to be honest it's hard to find something that is more diverse and challenging. If all you're after however is a very large salary, there are probably other industries that will offer that, but just in terms of autonomy, creativity, doing something that really makes a difference to people's lives, the connection in what we do in IT here is much stronger I think than you would necessarily get in many other industries.