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Default to analog

by Richard Bray

On my desk, there is a book called “General Report of the Commissioner of Public Works for the year ending 30th June, 1867.” This leather-bound volume of 671 pages is addressed to Viscount Monck, Governor General of Canada, and signed by J. Chas. Chapais, Commissioner of Public Works.

When the wonders of information technology don’t seem so wonderful, and a look around my office assures me the paperless office isn’t here yet, a few pages of Chapais’ report provide a remarkable calm.

The bulk of the book consists of reports from the regional superintendents who managed the concerns of the department: canals, works on navigable rivers, harbours, lighthouses, beacons and buoys, the slides and booms that guided logs to the sawmills, roads, bridges, public buildings and vessels.

On the eve of Confederation, this book gave the Crown an account of the operations of the Department of Public Works. Today, it gives us a look at how different the operations of government have become.

By candles, gas jets or natural light, their reports were prepared with quill pen and paper, carefully copied for their records and delivered to Ottawa by steam trains, muddy roads and the still-clear water of rivers and lakes. The more fortunate superintendents had secretaries, also men, to write out their reports – others did it themselves. Telegrams were reserved for emergencies, and their language was pared to the minimum.

According to the report, the only members of the Department of Public Works who purchased anything remotely resembling information technology were those who installed a system of bells and visible indicators for communication throughout the Parliament Buildings.

“The electric fluid is supplied by what is termed the Daniell Battery,” the report says quaintly, but anyone involved in a large-scale procurement today will recognize the constraints behind the decision. Managers had the choice between a basic indicatory system or a repeating one, which would presumably have allowed two-way communication. “The complexity of the indicatory and

repeating system, as well as the great expense of carrying it out,” the report says, “led to the adoption of the simple indicatory system for all the buildings.”

But during the project implementation, “Mr. Hutson, the person employed for that purpose, discovered an ingenious method by which the bell is kept ringing as long as the indicator remains fallen, instead of when the finger is removed from the call button.” In other words, the person at the other end had to acknowledge the message to make the noise stop. Was the ingenious Mr. Hutson a buyer or a seller, a departmental employee or a contractor? Whichever he was, he found a way of adding value without spending more money.

The final sentence of the three pages devoted to a description of the bells system hints at the pride Public Works felt in the successful completion of this early, leading-edge IT implementation: “For bell service there has been used about sixteen and a half miles of wire.”

Today, federal procurement of information technology is in a state of transition. In the last half dozen years, the Auditor General has raised flags about the tendency of large-scale IT projects to miss their deadlines, cost more than predicted and fail to meet their stated objectives.

In September, Public Works and Government Services Canada dropped National Master Standing Offers for software purchases to implement a new system of Benefits Driven Procurement (BDP). Because BDP is about two years away, software vendors and buyers will have to live with a transitional system called Departmental Individual Standing Offers.

Public sector managers in IT procurement face urgent decisions on short deadlines. Vendors face intense competition and shifting priorities. This column will focus on the practical challenges of IT procurement at every level of government, and the benefits that success can bring. In the months ahead, it will look at topics like the impact of the Internet on government operations, how e-commerce will affect procurement and the right to privacy in an information society.

There’s always a fresh challenge. In the centuries before the millennium, the Department of Public Works worked with the private sector to harness the physical strength of Canada, through physical improvements like roads and waterways. The goal was nation-building, in the most literal sense.

The challenge of the next century is build a smarter, more competitive Canada. Can municipal, provincial and federal governments – in fact, any public entity – acquire the right information technology tools to do the job? This column will follow that story.

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