Réponse à l'article paru dans le Citizen au sujet du SIGNET

Avez-vous pris connaissance de l'article sur le SIGNET publié le 8 février dernier dans *l'Ottawa Citizen*? Nous le reproduisons ici, avec la réponse envoyée par le Ministère pour rétablir les faits.

Une version écourtée de la lettre de M. Clarke a été publiée dans *le Citizen* du 21 février dernier.

Millions of dollars puts Foreign Affairs on-line, but not necessarily in touch

COMMENT

Official Circles

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Over the past eight years, the Department of Foreign Affairs has spent more than $145 million of public funds on fancy new computer systems to link its operations around the world. And after all that expense, the folks at headquarters are still having trouble sending a simple memo from one desk to another in the same building.

Foreign Affairs has spent $92.4 million just in the past two years on its latest computer adventure, called the Secure Integrated Global Network — or SIGNET. By all accounts, someone trying to communicate electronically with the office down the hall would have better luck sending smoke signals via Tibet.

A recent internal memo circulated within the department suggests the system for exchanging in house information by computer — called "Icondesk e-mail" — is at least as much fun to use as the programming buttons on a home VCR.

"Icondesk (is) by any account one of the least user friendly and most frustrating e-mail packages around (to put it charitably)," writes one senior bureaucrat. "Even some of the SIGNET people (who provide sterling service under the circumstances) have told me privately that it is an 'embarrassment.'

"As anyone who has ever used one knows, a good e-mail package is a godsend, an essential personal productivity tool . . . Icondesk is . . . pathetically slow, frustratingly designed, and simply unreliable — a positive impediment to our ability to do our jobs. I wish we would scrap it.

"P.S. After several unsuccessful attempts to send this message, I had to call SIGNET."

If nothing else, the Foreign Affairs types should be accustomed to getting so little for so much public money. Back in the mid-1980s, the department plunged headlong into a spectacular electronic sink-hole called the Canadian On-line Secure Information and Communications System — COSICS, for short.

In 1987, with COSICS still in its first year of frenzied cheque-writing, the auditor general warned the project was heading for the fiscal ozone hole in a manner that cried out for some good ol'-fashioned human intelligence.

Four years and $53 million later, some of the brighter lights at Foreign Affairs headquarters finally realized the problem with COSICS: It didn't work.

The second phase of COSICS was supposed to cost another $152 million. Instead, the Conservative government of the day pulled the plug, and the entire project was erased from everything but the national debt.

No matter. More cheques were printed, and the department promptly embarked on SIGNET, a whole new effort that was supposed to cost only another $138 million.

Richard Kohler, the department's current director general of all things computerized, says $92.4 million of the SIGNET budget has been spent, and already 96 per cent of the department is on-line — albeit not necessarily in touch.

Notably, this does not include another $60 million spent last year alone on other computer "efficiencies" in the same department.

One of those is the new financial management system which, unfortunately, wasn't designed to share information with the new personnel management system.

Auditor General Denis Desautels pointed out in his latest annual report that this truly unique feature of the two computer systems "creates difficulty in analysing all aspects of the cost and numbers of persons working for the department at any particular time or place."

Compared to not knowing how many people are on the payroll, it was small potatoes, the auditor general seemed to think, to blow $92.4 million on a SIGNET system that still can't get a memo from the boss's office to the secretary's desk: Ongoing monitoring of the project, he said, might be a good idea.

Foreign Affairs' imperial computer wizard Kohler claims any complaints about SIGNET and its associated internal communications software, Icondesk, must be coming from "a few frustrated employees."

That pocket of malcontents apparently includes Kohler himself. He recently wrote in a departmental newsletter: "I think it's clear that the original Icondesk product did not completely satisfy departmental or individual requirements. . . . And we are still encountering a significant degree of frustration."

Kohler says the manufacturer of Icondesk is promising a new version. It is being provided "free" and might actually work.

But that's not the end of it. In his recent newsletter, Kohler laments that any future budget cuts would affect "our ability to upgrade equipment and software on the present three- to four-year basis."

All of which may leave ordinary taxpayers wondering if anyone in government is getting the message.

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NOTE: A number of folks in the military have taken issue with our recent column on their perks and benefits. We have asked National Defence for clarification. Stay tuned.

If you have a tip or information for Greg Weston, please call Touchline at 721-1990 and press code 8550 on a Touch-Tone phone.