

Editorial

John Mitchell

The Government keeps trying new schemes to persuade us to vote. You can see their concern. If a government is elected by only one-third of the electorate, then it cannot really claim to have a mandate to govern. The answer, the Government believe, as do the opposition, is to use technology. The internet, SMS texting and interactive television are in the frame and various pilots are tried at each election. Now increasing the turnout is a laudable objective in its own right, but not at the expense of the integrity of the process. The Government has already had its fingers burnt with postal voting, but still has not learned that confidentiality and integrity are at least as important as availability. I have both a personal and professional interest in this area and for a couple of years I was the BCS's resident expert on the now disbanded Security Panel. Since then I have kept up the pressure on the Government, via the Electoral Commission, who are meant to ensure that the voting process is fair. Every time they try something new they ask for comments on the process and I examine it and have always gone back with the same observation. 'Yes, the process may encourage more people to vote, but it is inherently insecure'. They thank me for my interest and then we go through the same farce the next time around. Public consultation I have learned is simply a way of legitimising what was always intended. A bit like the electronic petitions on the Number 10 web site. Yes, we realise that over a million of you disagree with road pricing, but we are going ahead with these trials anyway. I tried postal voting this time round. When I received the ballot paper it included a telephone number so that I could check if my vote had been received. Excellent, I thought, until after several days of trying the national rate number for what should have been a local call, the system kept telling me that my vote had not been received. Eventually I called my local electoral services officer who said that my vote had been received, but that they did not have the resources to scan the information into the system. My letter of complaint to my council received a brush-off response along the lines that we are too busy, we received a lot of postal votes, we outsourced it and scanning takes time. No apology, no mentioning of improving the service. Nothing either so far from the Electoral Commission, but perhaps they are too busy thinking up new schemes.

Then Tesco sent me an email saying that my internet phone number will be discontinued unless I use it within the next thirty days. As I use the device regularly I contact their support desk to ascertain what the problem was. There is no problem I am told, We simply sent this to everyone as a friendly reminder to ensure that people use the phone. So Tesco's idea of a friendly reminder is to threaten all their customers with disconnection. I would hate to receive an unfriendly message from them. I wonder how these things

happen. Does someone sit around all day thinking of ways to annoy their customers, or they so lazy that they can't be bothered to filter out their users? Either way, it shows that the old audit test of monitoring customer response is a sure way of ascertaining how well your customer service is performing. If for every complaint you assume that a further ten customers must be really annoyed, but do not have the time or energy to do anything, then implementing a simple report to the main board should focus their minds on the link between customer service and customer loyalty. Although as a senior banker once told me when his cups one evening, "John, you have more chance of getting divorced than changing your bank account, so why should we concern ourselves with customer service"?. He is right of course. There has to be a business need to provide good customer service. If the customers don't ask for it then why provide it?

This is why I have recently got myself elected to the Specialist Group Executive Committee (SGEC). I was incensed at new BCS accounting rules which effectively removed from the SGs their reserves. In our case over £20,000 of hard earned money has disappeared into BCS central funds. See our Treasurer's report in this edition. However, what really annoyed me was the BCS attempt to rewrite history. Some of us are old enough to know that the SGs saved the BCS from bankruptcy in the early 1990s, but the current BCS line is that this did not happen. The job of the SGEC is to represent the SGs, but I saw very little of that in this instance. So putting my feet where my mouth was I had no option but to get involved once again in BCS central affairs. I have previously been a member of Council and was once asked to be BCS Treasurer so I do have some idea as to how things should work. That's what we need from you. More involvement in running your SG. If you don't get involved then you can't complain about what your Management Committee delivers.

In this issue we have a suggested charter for system administrators from our old friend Andrew Cormack of UKERNA (United Kingdom Education and Research Networking Association) which is an attempt to codify the duties of these powerful people. Toby Stevens, chair of the BCS Information Privacy Expert Panel, identifies identity myths, analyses identity management and proposes that there's no such thing as identity theft. Ben Richmond discusses using enterprise content management (ECM) to enable the knowledge-based workforce, while, despite all the theory, the European Spreadsheet Users Interest Group (EuSprig) shows how spreadsheets are really created. A new, regular column from Andrea Simmons of the BCS Security Forum who identifies the various consultation exercises it has been involved with, plus our usual report from the antipodes by Bob Ashton and an update on membership benefits from Mark Smith. Check out our accounts from Jean Morgan and you will appreciate my point about kissing our reserves good bye. My goodness, I am becoming a really grumpy old man.

