

Scenario

I pretended to be a member of the public who was not comfortable using a computer, who called into planning reception and asked for another look at a drawing he had seen in the paper files the previous week. I, in that role, spoke to a member of staff behind the reception desk.

The exchange that follows is not attempting to be a verbatim report but it is representative of the conversation.

What happened

Public: Can I have another look at a drawing in a planning file.

Staff: Are you happy to use a computer yourself?

Public: No, I never use one.

Staff: Do you know the planning application number?

Public: No.

Staff: What application was it?

Public: The one for Green Park

Staff: Is that the Office or the Hotel one, do you know?

Public: The Hotel

Staff uses computer behind desk, finds application number and notes it.

Staff: I've got the number, would you come to the computer over there (in the public space)

Staff sits at public computer, enters number onto screen and the planning application file list displays.

Staff: Which drawing did you want to see.

Public: The artist's impression of the building as seen from the grass on the other side of the road.

Staff scans list of available files and clicks on most likely descriptions. A series of

Staff: Is that the one? **Public: No.**

Having exhausted the best guess list:

Staff: I will have to try them all in turn, I haven't found it by choosing the most obvious ones.

Another series of

Staff: Is that the one? **Public: No.**

At this point a genuine member of the public came in and waited to be attended to, so the role play was terminated. I knew which file was the drawing I asked for, so I displayed it on the screen to prove it existed. I thanked the member of staff and left, and allowed the member of staff to deal with a genuine customer.

The unsuccessful search above had taken about 10 minutes. At the rate of progress, the drawing requested would probably have taken another 2-3 minutes to find. If the paper file had been given to the customer he would have found the drawing he was interested in by turning a few pages; perhaps 3 minutes from arriving at the desk.

Conclusion

The application chosen was bigger than many of the more routine ones – there were 84 files discounting the public comments – but even so it was tiny in comparison with major projects like the Western Riverside; and it was almost exactly the same size as the Bath Press application, so it was reasonably typical of the type of application the public not familiar with a computer might want to examine.

Unless the member of the public is happy to use a computer unaided (in which case a home computer would probably be used) the new paperless system wastes the time of both public and staff, and ties up the public access computer for a long time. It is probable that those happy to use a computer were already using the on-line system from home, so the proper comparison is with the public who went to the reception desk as a first choice and then examined the filed papers while the staff got on with something else. For those members of the public the superseded paper based system was much more efficient.

Footnote

This account is not in any way a criticism of the member of staff who took part. I as a member of the public would have rated the service I got as friendly, helpful, patient, appropriate; but ultimately unsuccessful due to the system provided and not the person using it.

A proper, complete and accurate costing of the changes, balancing the savings in paper and filing against the greater staff time dealing with the public plus the manpower dealing with the inevitable complaints, would show that the new system costs more than the old one. This has the hallmarks of an instinctive authoritarian decision rather than a properly evaluated business one.