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When government loses data, it's a matter of broken trust

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Just because the public is obliged to give some personal information to government organisations, it doesn't mean that the utmost care shouldn't be taken to protect it, says Alan Thorpe



On almost a weekly basis, the government is confronted by headlines revealing a new mishandling of public data, with records recently left on a train, found by a roadside or simply lost in the post.

Since the beginning of 2008, high-profile data losses have ranged from missing HMRC records to MoD information and, most recently, personal details of 18,000 NHS workers lost in the post.

The consequences for the government and other public sector organisations can be disastrous. The last thing the Labour front bench needs right now is to be laid open to accusations of incompetence with something seemingly as simple as securely using and storing people's details.

In fact, with consumers becoming more aware of the need to protect themselves from identity fraud which could see their bank accounts wiped clean by unscrupulous con artists, the government and Civil Service could do without the constant ignominy of being portrayed as institutions giving away thousands of personal records at the same time as advising the public to keep their data under wraps.

Looking at the responses to a recent a survey of 30,000 people to determine their attitudes towards organisations across a range of sectors that lost their data, it's clear that individuals take a dim view of these episodes. Prompted with a list of organisation types that also include financial, retail, utility and leisure firms, as well as charities, the government sector was ranked first by some 54 per cent of people as the one that should take the most care with people's details.

Losing data seems a particular turn-off for women voters, with 56 per cent of female respondents saying they would be more concerned by government data blunders than mishaps in any other sector. A majority of 55- to 64-year-old men and women were also irked by public sector problems.

Of course, the difference between the public getting fed up with private companies mislaying their information, or passing it on to third parties without their consent, and the same thing occurring within government, is that you can disassociate yourself from private firms, but hardly stop Whitehall bosses collecting and using your data for things as essential as, for example, tax or DVLA purposes.

At a time when government is minded to decentralise some powers of service provision and build closer links between local councils, GPs and their communities, data security should be even more precious. And the powers that be are not unaware of the glaring errors that have dominated column inches this year. The Ministry of Justice kicked off a report into data sharing while debates about ID cards rage on in Westminster committee rooms as they do in pubs across the country.

So for those involved in government, it's really more a matter of broken trust. If organisations misuse data or create problems with the way they store or share people's personal information, it's inevitable that individuals may think twice about trusting them again. As the survey showed, it's imperative that companies tread carefully when dealing with data if relationships are to be nurtured for the benefit of both the organisation and the individual.

It is equally important, of course, for people to be aware of the issues around sharing their personal information. While divulging details can lead to them receiving and benefiting from better services, they should take care to check as far as possible who will hold the data and what it will be used for.

But ultimately the onus lies with those in the public sector who receive, store and use the data. Just because the public is obliged to give personal information in certain circumstances to government organisations, it doesn't mean those in the corridors of power should shirk their responsibility for ensuring the utmost care is taken to protect those records.

The recent flux of data breaches has led Britons to take an extremely tough stance on how their suppliers or the government deal with their personal details and as a result it is imperative for organisations to put into place stringent policies to minimise data risks.

Put simply, if you lose someone's details, you will lose their trust, and trust is not something that either politicians or civil servants should give up lightly.

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