Image counts

A recent *CSW* survey, carried out with BT, revealed that awareness of the Public Services Network is low among public servants. **Mark Smulian** examines why that might be, and discusses the likely consequences

A survey undertaken by *Civil Service World* last year with the support of BT revealed that awareness of the Public Services Network (PSN) is low among public sector workers. Not only that, but few appreciate PSN's potential for driving efficiency by delivering seamless IT and communications across public service providers.

Opinions differ as to how problematic this state of affairs is. Some argue that, since PSN is not yet up and running, it is unreasonable to expect much awareness of it beyond those who have been closely involved in its development.

Others fear that low awareness will lead to low adoption of PSN among key stakeholders. And some suggest that the technical jargon surrounding PSN is off-putting to people who could benefit from the system.

Our survey says…

The survey drew 1,304 responses from public servants. Only about 20 per cent considered themselves knowledgeable about PSN, while half had never heard of it. Even among those who claimed to be knowledgeable about PSN, half did not know how far their organisation had got in the adoption process.

Those who claimed a 'detailed' or 'broad' understanding of PSN varied from eight per cent in central government to 14 per cent in local government. The figures in other sectors were five per cent in health, eight per cent in defence and 13 per cent in the police.

This suggests that PSN has an image problem. It may be able to do all that its advocates claim in joining up public services, but the people expected to use it day by day appear to know little about it.

Sharing the benefits

Speaking about the research, PSN project director for Yorkshire and the Humber, Geoff Prowling, says: "It is surprising that the level of awareness is so low. The Cabinet Office has held a national roadshow region by region, and there is a regular drip-feed of information about what is going on."

Prowling believes PSN is a familiar concept to people at chief information officer level, but told *CSW* that many non-specialist managers above them know little about it: "If you go above that, to directors with overall responsibility for ICT, then awareness is lower."

He suggests the low profile of PSN among the police and health services may result from the upheavals caused by spending cuts in the former and reorganisation in the latter, which have focused attention elsewhere.

Prowling believes one solution to the problem is more education about what PSN can do – for example, in aggregating public sector demand to gain greater procurement clout, and in linking multiple service providers.

Even so, he fears entrenched cultures will prove stubborn. "I'm new to the public sector," he says, "and I find there is a reticence about change here and an attitude of: 'This is how we have always done it'."

Turn off the tech talk

Martin Ferguson, policy director of local government body the Society of Information Technology Managers (Socitm), was more direct in his response to the research. "The trouble is that too much talk about PSN is technical gobbledegook," he says.

Ferguson believes that if PSN is explained in plain language, public servants will be more likely to use it. "The biggest services it should be used for are social care and health," he remarks. "PSN provides a secure network of communications between the many different agencies involved to exchange sensitive information in privacy."

A further advantage, Ferguson says, is that PSN can enable flexible working, allowing public servants to access and transfer information wherever they are.

BT's Mark Langdale told *CSW* that the Public Services Network brings the "open public services" concept alive by helping people to share data and services
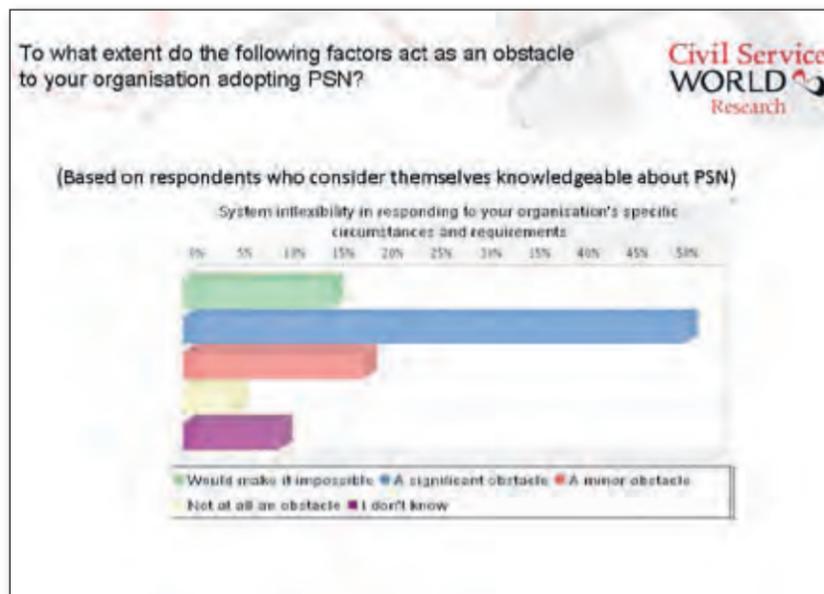
Jane Stedman's comment about the need for PSN to be flexible was echoed by the survey
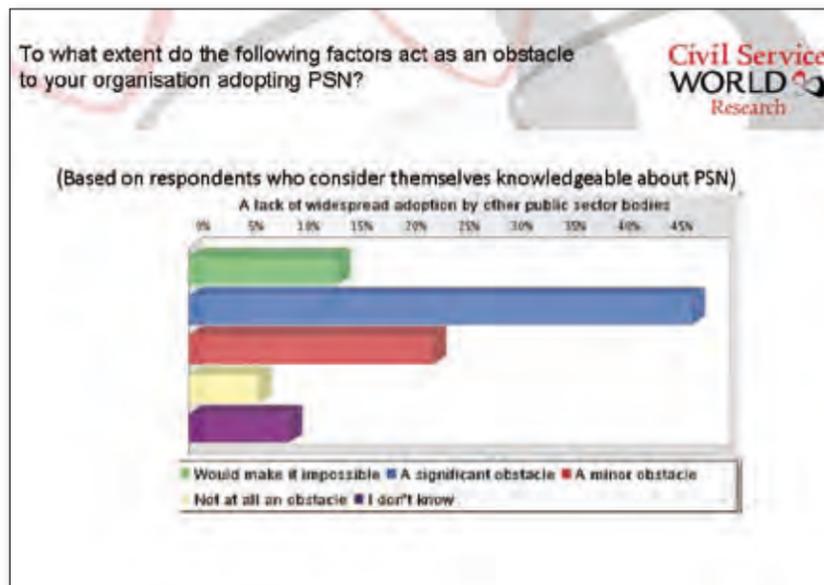
Widespread adoption across the public sector is central to PSN's success, as this graph shows

If the exchange of information is a significant benefit of PSN, the *CSW* and BT research shows that the security of such processes will be crucial to its success.

This point is reinforced by Jane Stedman, network and desktop services manager at Hampshire County Council, who says: "The challenge for PSN will be ensuring appropriate levels of control and security to satisfy all potential user communities, while maintaining sufficient flexibility to address local issues and diversity.

"The obstacle of creating standards that meet the perceived security requirements of all organisations should not be underestimated," she continues. "[But it] can be overcome if there is a genuine desire to create a network that benefits the whole public sector."

Joined-up public services

Private companies have an important role in the creation of this network. BT was involved in developing PSN, and has recently been named in the Connectivity Framework. That gives the company a vested interest in PSN's success – and its head of PSN, Mark Langdale, is unconcerned by the survey's findings.

"There were 1,300 replies [to the survey]," he remarks, "and would you really expect a wide knowledge of a data system and its architecture? Looked at like that, awareness is quite high."

Commenting on the fact that awareness is higher in local government than elsewhere, Langdale says: "They are enthusiastic about PSN because it means they can share IT with social enterprises, the voluntary sector and other partners. With PSN, the 'open public services' concept comes alive."

Moreover, Langdale tells *CSW* that it is critically important for PSN to be presented as a tool for joined-up government – like the internet itself – rather than as an IT project. In that way, he believes that PSN will become part of the fabric of public service delivery, and bring benefits for both providers and end users.

To get to this point, it will be essential that public servants have a clear idea of what PSN can do. To achieve this, PSN's architects probably need to cut through the technical jargon and explain in clear terms how the network could make their lives easier. The focus should not be on the IT, but on the PSN's potential to drive efficiency and enhance the delivery of public services. ∎