

Toronto Star, July 13, 2004

Tories ignored computer warnings

TRISH HENNESSY AND PETER H. SAWCHUK

Ontario taxpayers are on the hook for another \$10 million fee to Accenture to fix some glitches in a computer system the private consultant designed to help the Mike Harris government crack down on welfare fraud.

This fiasco could have been prevented.

For years, public sector workers using the very computers Accenture designed complained to the former Conservative government that the system was riddled with errors and that workers needed to have a greater say in the solution.

Both CUPE and OPSEU unions raised warning bells, but those warnings fell on deaf ears.

Two years ago, in partnership with CUPE, we interviewed front-line workers in Ontario's welfare offices to learn first-hand workers' experience with Accenture's new computer system.

This is what we heard: Harris promised the Accenture deal would provide Ontario's welfare and disability system with "excellent customer service," allowing workers to spend more time serving recipients.

Workers say that never happened.

They told us the computer system was riddled with errors from day one and many errors remain unresolved.

There have been countless reports of computers sending out letters informing clients their welfare benefits were being cut off because they owe the system money.

Many times, the system is in error and the client does not owe anything. But workers are powerless to stop the computer from spitting out the threatening letter.

The ministry's help-desk system has been chronically under-resourced. Workers have, at times, waited months for help to resolve a computer error.

But clients can't wait months, so workers developed new and creative ways to "work around" the computer system in order to get the cheque mailed on time.

This research finding often gets lost in the outcry over a \$10 million bill to get Accenture to fix problems in the system it created: From the beginning, it has been the front-line sector workers who have made Accenture's new computer system work for the Ontario government. Public sector workers have saved Ontario taxpayers millions by stickhandling through an inflexible computer system, yet Accenture continues to collect exorbitant fees.

Workers told us the problem isn't just an inflexible computer system. The problem is that Accenture's new system — under the direction of the previous Conservative government — set out to to change welfare work itself.

For example, home visits used to be commonplace for welfare caseworkers. They got to know their clients, saw how they lived, and developed a helping relationship. Not only could they direct benefits effectively, they could smell a cheat a mile away.

Now new clients make their first contact through an automated telephone voice system. And, if they go into their local welfare office, they discover a worker staring into the screen of a computer.

Workers say clients "talk to a different person every time. It's like: `You're the 12th person I've had to call to get diapers.'"

"We used to use our eyes and ears and judgment," one worker told us. "Now we just type things into the computer."

Finally, one told us point blank, "We've lost sight of the client. We've gone from client focus to money focus."

Workers said they feel like the computer monitored their every move and restricted their freedom to exercise judgment. As one worker put it, she used to be able to "get through my day with my social work skills" but laments that her background is no longer a valued part of the job.

"My networking then was how to help people," she says. "Now it's, how can I get this cheque off? That's my day."

Workers tell us Accenture and the Ontario government foisted upon the province's welfare offices a flawed new information technology system designed to help capture welfare fraud stats rather than deliver on one of their key goals — improve quality of service. Ontario's welfare delivery system has been radically changed in the process. Workers tell us that change is for the worse.

"We're presiding over a very major crisis. That sense of urgency never leaves me," one worker said.

What lessons can be learned from Ontario's deal with Accenture? Every large-scale work and tech change initiative is full of challenges, difficulties, glitches.

But if the previous government had listened to the workers' concerns — rather than valuing the private consultant's expensive viewpoint — Queen's Park might today have the in-house capacity to fix the problem themselves and save taxpayers \$10 million.

Three decades of research on computer design all point to the same finding: The user matters. In this case, workers matter.

In the case of Accenture's new computer system, front-line workers told the government it was flawed from the beginning. They asked for input. Harris refused to listen.

Ontario taxpayers, welfare and disability benefits recipients and over-stressed workers are all paying the price.