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Circular 24/1990:- Annual Reviews of Information Technology (IT) Progress

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I am directed by the Minister for Finance to refer to the significant investment in IT in the civil service in recent years. This investment, which is set to continue, requires that every effort be made to ensure that the use of IT is effective and that the potential benefits are fully realised. This circular is being issued to direct the attention of Departments* to the need to review at regular intervals, preferably annually, the progress being achieved in the utilisation of IT and to set out an approach for carrying out such reviews.

2. Aims of Review

2.1 The primary purpose of the review is to assess the effectiveness of the current contribution of IT to the Department's objectives and to produce an investment and development programme for the period ahead (one to three years). The review should also identify when a (further) full strategic planning study may be necessary.

2.2 A secondary purpose of the review is to provide an update on the status of IT in the civil service as a basis for determining appropriate policies and strategies and initiating necessary actions, e.g. recruitment or training; determining estimate provisions; identifying opportunities for trans-departmental co-operation and identifying candidate projects for shared development by departments and the Central IT Services (CITS) of this Department.

2.3 The consolidated output from the individual reviews will become a major determinant of the annual CITS work programme. The output will also provide the basis for an annual report on IT in the civil service, thus providing feed-back to departments on progress generally.

* For Department, read Department/Office throughout this Circular.

3. General Principles

3.1 The reviews will be based on a structured approach and will operate best in situations where a strategic IT plan is already in place, as required by Department of Finance Circular 13/86 of 14 July, 1986. However, a review can be carried out even where a formal IT plan is not yet in place. It will be necessary also to tailor the review to the scale of IT activity involved.

3.2 The emphasis is on advancing the achievement of objectives, i.e. on the pursuit of benefits and on the definition of an appropriate development and investment programme rather than a judgmental review of progress against the existing IT plan. The focus is, therefore, pragmatic; the "ideal" of the strategic plan is balanced by a realistic view of the situation on the ground and the resources available. There should be a renewal of commitment to the aims of the strategy but changed circumstances may dictate a change in intermediate priorities and time scales.

3.3 Where Departments already conduct an annual IT review, it is recommended that the outputs from the existing procedure be made consistent with those now proposed (paragraph 4.2) in order to facilitate the central overview of IT status and progress throughout the civil service.

4. Review Inputs and Output

4.1 The following factors will be the major inputs to the review:

- new priorities, arising from any changes in the business or technical environments since completion of the last strategic plan or annual review;
- management and user satisfaction with IT services;
- the existing IT plan (or its equivalent);
- progress on implementation of the previous year's Development Programme;
- potential capability (financial resources, IT staffing and expertise, management commitment).

4.2 The output should be along the following lines:

- a Development Programme for the following year (statements of objectives for application projects and infrastructural developments and a timeframe for their implementation);
- a related Resource Plan (financial estimates, project staffing implications, an IT training plan);
- an updated Cost/Benefit Assessment where any significant changes are identified;
- other recommendations for achievement of IT potential;
- any proposals for CITS action (including shared projects).

5. Proposed Approach

5.1 The following 4-stage approach is suggested:

- (i) Assessment of current status, using the following structure:
- Consequences of changes in the business environment ;
 - Current impact of IT;
 - Progress on major projects;
 - Developments in the technical environment;
 - Capability of the IT Unit/Division.

The assessment should be prepared by the IT Unit/Division and considered by the IT Steering Committee and/or Management Advisory Committee. To help structure the assessment process CITS, in consultation with a number of departments, has compiled a checklist, which will be issued to IT Units. It is recommended that this be used as a basis for the assessment.

(ii) Review of the assessment by the Policy and Planning Unit in CITS. The purpose of the review is to identify opportunities for transdepartmental co-operation and to ensure that the experience gained from issues/lessons encountered in one department is available to others.

(iii) Preparation of an Investment and Development Programme by the IT Unit/Division (CITS will assist in this process if necessary).

(iv) Approval of the Investment and Development Programme by the IT Steering Committee and/or the Management Advisory Committee.

6. Enquiries

Enquiries concerning this circular should be addressed to the Policy and Planning Unit in the Central IT Services (CITS) of this Department - telephone number 767571, extensions 3545, 3523 or 3516

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E. Embleton
Assistant Secretary