

Too many cooks at Census?

When Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez told Congress this month that the department was giving up on part of its plan to use handheld devices in the 2010 census, the news was presented in many media outlets as a failure of technology or a failure of government. But it was never explained which it primarily was.

Gutierrez told the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice and Science that the Field Data Collection Automation (FDCA) project had run into significant schedule, performance and cost problems. He added that “a lack of effective communication with one of our key contractors has significantly contributed to the challenges.”

But who was responsible for the lack of effective communication?

According to Government Accountability Office reports, it seems that the blame goes mostly to the Commerce Department. During the past several years, for example, GAO found repeated instances of Commerce cutting budgets without reducing requirements of the project.

What’s more, according to a March GAO report, an independent study found that “the contractor is overwhelmed by a substantial increase in requirements, having thousands of unreconciled (that is, not validated) requirements.”

According to one analyst familiar with the project, the Census Bureau asked for many changes in requirements but wasn’t prepared to accept any changes in costs. But the biggest problem, said the analyst, who asked not to be identified, is that government agencies and departments

require approval by so many different parties and at so many stages. It's a complaint we've heard repeatedly from vendors in other sectors.

"What you would see here if you were able to look on the inside is that the headquarters designed a handheld based on what they thought the needs were, but then they might not have got the full buy-in from the field," the analyst said. "But guess what? The field is where the rubber hits the road."

"You can design the best gadget in the world, but if you don't teach people properly how to use it and get them to embrace it you're not going to have the success that you might want," the analyst said.

Marc Raimondi, director of communications at Harris, the contractor working with Census on the handhelds, noted that Commerce's recent decision was not a complete abandonment of the implementation of handhelds. "They are scaling back

their use of automation to a measured approach that they are more comfortable with," Raimondi said. "There still will certainly be 150,000 handhelds used in the 2010 census."

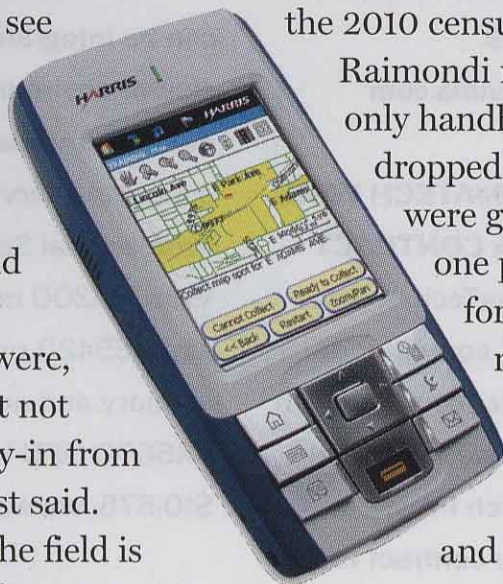
Raimondi noted that the only handhelds being dropped were those that were going to be used in one program — that for following up on nonresponders.

"That is one portion of the FDCA program, and the FDCA program is just one portion of the overall census," Raimondi said.

— Patrick Marshall

Never say 'no way out'

Sometimes, security can backfire. Homeland Security Assistant Secretary Greg Garcia was at the RSA Security conference in San Francisco earlier this month, spreading the word that cybersecurity is one of the department's top priorities.



OFF ROAD: The Harris handheld will have a small role in the census.

He held a series of one-on-one meetings with reporters, using the private booths set up in the press room for the interviews. In the interests of privacy and security, the booths have locks on the doors. All well and good, except that when our interview was finished, the latch on the door had jammed and the door wouldn't open. Rattling the handle did no good, rapping the door with hands didn't work and even a few swift kicks failed to open it. We weren't going anywhere, and the rattling, rapping and kicking failed to get the attention of anyone outside.

This provided the opportunity for a few more questions with the assistant secretary, but eventually we would have to leave the little room. Fortunately, one of the participants recognized the obvious: The booth was merely a set of flimsy, movable partitions. He pushed at one corner, folded back the wall, and we were able to walk out and tell the people out front that the door did not work.

Thinking outside the box really can work — if only some of my other problems could be fixed that easily. — William Jackson