

# Digital imperatives



**Tina Sommer**  
reflects on a  
the e-word...  
and why it is  
so important

**AFTER A SOMEWHAT DISAPPOINTING RESULT** during the environmental conference in Copenhagen, the interest in Brussels seems to have shifted onto another word beginning with the letter 'e'. Instead of the environmental agenda, the focus is now on the electronic agenda, also known as the digital agenda.

There are good reasons for this. We are getting used to e-government enabling online VAT returns, e-invoicing, online tax returns and online information. This will be much further expanded as was shown during an e-conference in Malmö, Sweden, last autumn.

In the Netherlands they are trialling an online system where citizens can view proposed buildings from a street view, as planning permission is being applied for. Spain has developed a website showing all petrol stations in an area enabling drivers to pick the most cost-effective petrol or diesel. The Point of Single Contact, now in place in every EU country as part of the Services Directive, is designed to enable businesses to apply online for licences they may need.

Public tenders have been digitally proclaimed for some time now, making purchasing more transparent and accessible. Day-to-day banking is conducted mostly online with cheques being phased out in the near future. Libraries are offering e-books that are downloadable online rather than hard copies.

Any kind of information we may need as businesses or citizens are more and more turned into e-services and one fine day, it may just be the only way we will get it.

**'Broadband should be treated as a universal service – a basic requirement and right, just like electricity, gas and water'**



As an IT consultant myself I cannot imagine doing business without the letter 'e'. Whether it's email or online intranets, not to mention backups and websites, a great way to do business and communicate with customers and suppliers is now digital.

This is all good news for my business or anyone involved in the industry. However, I can't help having a slightly uneasy feeling. What is going to happen if my internet service provider goes down? How do I deal with my broadband line being out of action for a longish time? Can I still do business and get the information I need? What about the people who simply don't know what to do, have had no training, or simply can't handle the technology or jargon? How competitive can we be, if our business is located in a rural area with no broadband or much lower connection speeds than elsewhere?

The European Commission is picking up on these problems by issuing a proposal on the digital agenda this spring. The core objective is

the availability of broadband to every household and business in the EU. What is already normal in high-speed countries such as Sweden, Finland and Estonia remains a major struggle in other EU countries, including the UK, where broadband coverage remains patchy and inconsistent.

We are often told that it is not commercially viable to make the necessary changes to telephone exchanges that are located in remote areas, placing the inhabitants of these rural communities at a serious disadvantage to everyone else.

The Commission wants to change this by making EU funds available to improve on the digital infrastructure. We in the FSB want to go further than that and insist on treating broadband as a universal service, a basic requirement and right just like electricity, gas and water. If we want to compete in the future, nothing less will do.

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