From the President: phone home

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Phone home

During his plenary lecture ‘Socio-technical thinking and practice’ at this year’s annual conference, Chris Clegg made the throwaway remark “…we are surrounded by crap systems”. Have I told you my story about a UK telecommunications company? One evening, not so long ago, a display on our broadband router which had hitherto always been blue or orange, turned red. Being an ergonomist, with an eye for these things, I thought “that’s interesting”. The next day, my wife Cheryl phoned me (on her mobile) to tell me that the home phone was dead…

As far as we have been able to tell, the reason our phone and broadband were disconnected without notice originated from the builder of our house (number 12) being slow registering the address. This meant that when we moved in, the national address database stopped at number 10. When we ordered the new phone line apparently, as a workaround, the telecomms company sales person selected number 1 from the address finder instead. A couple of years later, our disconnection occurred when a new neighbour moving into number 1 contacted the company wanting to take over the phone service to that house.

This was the start of a saga that ran for several months with several engineer appointments cancelled at short notice for surprising reasons such as: “Your original Ref/VOL.012-691817311961 has been cancelled as it has failed with our telephone service provider due to no active telephone service for this property and the order placed incorrectly for the incorrect address and I apologise for this.” After complaining to the company Chief Executive, the service was eventually reinstated, but it had to be with a new telephone number. It took a good while longer sorting out the problems caused by the phone number changing and various other issues. It seemed to me at the time that this was a fine example of an organisation with ‘crap systems’, which would benefit greatly from ergonomics attention, if only we could get in there.

During June I attended the Human Factors in Complex Systems event in Nottingham, held to celebrate the work of John Wilson. A couple of weeks later I chaired the one day Clinical Human Factors Group Open Seminar, in Loughborough. During panel question and answer sessions on both of these occasions, there was discussion as to how ergonomics and human factors might get large organisations to sit up and take notice. The conclusion in both cases was the same: gain understanding of the compelling business case for ergonomics at board level. Although we have only just received the news, this is a challenge where obtaining the Royal Charter should help. Previously we have been saying that ergonomics is important; now we have it on high authority that it really is! We are going to take full advantage of the credibility that this brings.