



# Can broadband break gridlock?

GDP is closely linked to the free flow of information, a leading engineer and consultant tells **John Collins**

**S**erial entrepreneur and management consultant Peter Cochrane believes Ireland could be heading for a catastrophic meltdown of its transport infrastructure - and that the widespread availability of broadband could be the only way to avoid it.

Cochrane, who stepped down as chief technology officer of BT in 2000, has been a regular visitor to Ireland over the years and, like many international observers, is impressed by our economic growth. But he's also aware that our infrastructure has failed to keep pace and as a result our economy is suffering.

"So far there seems to have been little effort to integrate everything - things are addressed in isolation but there's no integrated policy overall," says Cochrane. "To my mind, the final straw is the lack of any comprehensive broadband infrastructure."

In his own working life, broadband internet access is essential. The companies he has invested in span travel, entertainment, defence, security, and information and are scattered around the globe. Cochrane will make another of his trips to Ireland next week to address Engineering Action, the Engineers Ireland annual conference at Croke Park.

The topic of his presentation is "commuting chaos", a subject dear to many people's hearts in a city where Cochrane only half-jokes that journeys take "half an hour by car and 15 minutes by foot".

This lag between economic prosperity and providing the necessary infrastructure is not unique to Ireland, but Cochrane believes we should be doing a lot more. "Everywhere in the world is struggling but it's the degree of the struggle that's important and what you don't want is the Bombay or Calcutta levels of struggle," says Cochrane. "You want to get close up to the leaders in the rest of the western world."

Far from being an armchair critic, Cochrane has positive suggestions about what Ireland needs to do. He suggests continued investment in the road network - a proposal that will no

doubt go down well with the engineers next week - but also in rail in order to take some pressure off roads.

He's far from a fan of public transport, suggesting it has "failed" all over the world.

But what Cochrane believes will make a fundamental difference to Ireland, and provide an opportunity for the country to build on its economic success to date, is a significant investment in new technology.

For example, he believes public transport will have limited impact because people are making more complex journeys than before which are more suited to cars.

He suggests that an extensive "road sensing" network be deployed in tandem with building new roads. This would give drivers information on where traffic is building up, where parking is available and other useful information that can help prevent traffic chaos. "Once the log jam starts, it's gridlock in no time," says Cochrane. "In most infrastructures or services they collapse abruptly. There's a steady build-up but all of a sudden there is a collapse point where they can't cope."

He also suggests that a significant investment in broadband - not just to major companies but also to every home in the country - is an economic imperative.

"There seems to have been an unwillingness or lethargy in rolling out broadband, almost as if it wasn't even an afterthought but a threat," says Cochrane. "And the reality is, if you look at the nations that are experiencing 2-6 per cent growth in GDP, those that are in the bracket of 4-6 per cent are putting at least 50 per cent of that growth down to broadband, ICT, internet trading and all of those kinds of things."

"Roughly speaking, those that are in the 2-4 per cent growth have not got very good broadband. It's kind of stark."

Cochrane also supports the idea of decentralisation in theory but warns that it needs to be managed properly. He suggests it is most suitable for organisations where "absolutely everything is nailed down by process and you will have very few people mobile", which implies government departments would be good candidates.

"The only danger is that it becomes the only [major local employer] and the whole town feeds off it," says Cochrane. "Then one day it shuts down and everyone suffers. That's the big thing. I think dispersing the population has a very positive effect, but you have to ask the question 'which bits?'"

Despite his own engineering background, the conversation continually comes back to technology and, in particular, the importance of a modern broadband infrastructure for the Irish economy.

He happily explains that it's not a case of his being a technophile but rather a prerequisite for making money.

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“In any modern economy the GDP is absolutely linked directly to the ability for atoms and bits to move,” says Cochrane. “If information can’t move, and things can’t move and people can’t move, then you can’t make money.”



Peter Cochrane suggests that an extensive “road sensing” network be deployed in tandem with building new roads. This would provide drivers with vital travel information. Photograph: Frank Miller