Internal collaboration as a cornerstone of national digitalisation strategies

Empirical findings and recommendations

1. Internal collaboration: A key challenge for digital transformation

European governments have made concerted efforts to develop and implement comprehensive strategies to tackle the transition towards digital government. Strengthening collaboration and engaging with a broad range of government stakeholders has widely been recognised by academia and governments as a key recipe for transforming how the public sector works and how to improve policies and services (Juell-Skielse et al., 2017; Meijer, 2015; OECD, 2019; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011).

However, as it stands, effective collaboration between government actors to drive digital transformation is anything but simple. In a complex world of competing interests, silo structures, and increasingly fragmented government sectors, the notorious challenges of collaboration have not been resolved. Potential struggles which arise during the collaboration process, such as deadlocks resulting from power imbalances or a lack of incentives for collaboration, continue to hinder digital transformation of governments.

Research efforts have largely focused on understanding collaboration of governments with citizens and businesses, whereas the dynamics of collaboration between public sector actors often remain a ‘black box’.

2. Aim and scope of the study

TROPICO Work Package 6 aims to study how public managers can better steer digital transformation and improve service provision. In order to achieve this objective, we explored how internal collaborative practices within the public sector are justified and outlined in policy documents dealing with digitalisation. Although sustainable changes can only be realised through actual implementation, these policy documents shed light on the visions, goals and underlying assumptions that governments have towards collaboration in the context of digitalisation. To this end, we conducted a comparative content analysis of two sets of digitalisation strategies in eight European countries at two different points in time (Hammerschmid et al., 2019).

3. Key findings

Our findings confirm that despite the extensive experience governments have gained with digitalisation, fragmentation, and hence a lack of coordination and

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1 Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and the UK
In order to address the collaboration deficit, the digitalisation strategies emphasise central coordination in a hierarchical sense rather than collaboration as preferred solution. Internal collaboration refers more to weak or medium forms (i.e. sharing information) rather than to stronger forms (i.e. sharing work or responsibilities). As shown in figure 2, we also observe a clear shift in the motives for collaboration among public sector organisations and actors. These motives have transitioned from a dominant focus on interoperability and exchange of data in the earlier strategies, towards an increased emphasis on learning, joint design of policies and services, and especially innovation in processes and products in the more recent strategies.

Despite claims that the digital era is the era of collaboration and networked societies (OECD, 2019), in light of the analysed strategies we cannot yet speak of a shift towards greater involvement or empowerment of different government stakeholders. By comparing the strategies with existing reports on their implementation, we instead find a gap between ‘talk’ and ‘action’. It is therefore even more important to enhance government capacity for effective collaborative endeavours in the long run.
**Figure 2: Frequency of motives for internal collaboration**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motives</th>
<th>Initial strategies</th>
<th>Most recent strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Synergies</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interoperability and exchange</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of data</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery of services</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultation</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counsel and support</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of policies/services</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Hammerschmid et al., 2019 (share of codes)*

4. **Practical implications**

The strategies reveal several success factors for digitalisation that can be directly linked to internal collaboration. These are commitment, reliable framework conditions, communication, skills and continuity. These factors have also been identified in the literature (e.g. Fountain, 2013; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2014) and form the basis for six recommendations to policymakers and public managers in charge of designing and implementing digitalisation strategies:

1) It is essential to establish **political and leadership commitment**, especially for ongoing long-term digitalisation projects.

2) Leadership and management are more likely to commit to and identify with collaboration if both a **fundamental agreement on goals and a shared vision of government digitalisation** have been reached.

3) Digitalisation strategies can help to establish direction and develop a **common vision** for all partners involved. However, it also requires some degree of **formal rules** on how to act in a collaborative arrangement that must be established. This enhances the predictability of collaboration, and thus may increase the actors’ willingness to engage in the process beyond initial stages.
4) Technology is too often seen as an innovation goal per se. However, government officials are motivated less by the innovative technology itself, but rather by the associated public value. Providing sufficient incentives, visualising past achievements and opportunities, and continuously communicating the benefits that collaboration brings in the context of government digitalisation will thus further cultivate the motivation to work together.

5) In order to strengthen the capacity of political and administrative leadership to communicate, create shared meaning, resolve conflicts and overcome resistance to change, digitalisation strategies should pay more attention to the development of collaboration and networking skills, in particular among public sector managers.

6) Trust is found to be a key condition for successful internal collaboration. As trust emerges from interpersonal connections and repeated interactions over time, it is important to ensure a continuity in human resources working on digitalisation projects and to establish new platforms for collaboration such as digitalisation labs.

If policy-makers and public managers are ready to embrace collaboration and ensure that both rhetoric and solid policy-making go hand in hand, collaboration can make a considerable contribution towards digital transformation of governments.

5. References


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