



Making Digital Happen:

Ontario's Public Service and the Challenges of Digital Governance

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MAKING DIGITAL HAPPEN

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	4
WHAT WE HEARD:	6
Changing citizen expectations for service delivery	7
Changing government expectations for policy advice	8
Barriers to being digital: lack of capacity	9
Barriers to being digital: bureaucratic culture	11
Benefits and opportunities of “becoming digital”	13
WHAT TO DO? OBSERVATIONS AND IDEAS TO CONSIDER:	14
Seek strategic opportunities to build technical and human capacity	15
Develop initiatives that can spur on and institutionalize cultural change.	15
Using non-digital fundamental shifts to further the digital agenda.	16
RECOMMENDATIONS	17
CONCLUSION	18
REFERENCES	19

Introduction

Lauded as a leader in digital (Clarke, Lindquist, and Roy 2017), Ontario is one of many governments striving to manage the disruptions and opportunities offered by a myriad of new digital technologies. Whether transforming government services through user-centered design, engaging with citizens on social media, crowd-sourcing policy design, or collaborating with non-state actors to analyze open data, governments are increasingly faced with new ways of doing business.

Upon assuming office Ontario Premier Doug Ford jettisoned the position of Minister of Digital from his Cabinet, but moved Ontario's first Chief Digital Officer to the head of the province's key service department, the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services. The highly anticipated Ernst and Young line-by-line review of Ontario's finances, commissioned by the Premier, was bullish on 'digital'. It promoted digital not only as a way to secure efficiencies but also to push for modernization of the Ontario public service, and encourage a culture of innovation. Now government just has to get on with embedding digital into the bones of Ontario's public service. What then can be done to make digital happen for Ontario?

The province has been forward looking in this regard. In 2018 Ontario launched an ambitious plan *OPS of the Future* for transforming the Ontario Public Service (OPS) (Government of Ontario 2018b). A core component of the new OPS vision is to transition public services away from traditional hierarchies to a more user and data-driven, iterative, and process-based approach to policy making and service delivery (Government of Ontario 2018a). Other initiatives including the **Open Data Directive, the Ontario Policy Innovation Hub, the Ontario Digital Service, and, more recently, the 2018 Digital Action Plan** have complemented the digital strategy.

Ontario's vision for a more digitally-enabled government demonstrates the ways in which digital governance has captured the attention and focus of executives at the leadership level. Less is known, however, regarding the practical implementation of digital-era governance from the ground up within the public service (Clarke et al 2017). Recent public administration scholarship notes the paucity of data on how digital technology is influencing policy design (Clarke and Craft 2018), citizen engagement (Longo 2017), service delivery, regulation, and accountability (Clarke et al. 2017; Lindquist and Huse 2017). In particular, how has "going digital" altered the inner workings of government, especially as it responds to changing citizen expectations?

To start exploring these issues, a consortium of academic researchers from 8 leading universities, together with federal and provincial governments, non-profit and private sector institutions, and the Institute on Governance came together in 2014 to form the Digital Governance Partnership (DGP), a research network supported by a SSHRC Partnership Development Grant. **The network aims to appraise the quality of Canada's existing systems of governance in the digital era and to assess the ways in which governance institutions and practices can be transformed to harness the benefits of digital tools while mitigating the costs** (Clarke et al 2017).



One of the early gaps identified by the network is a lack of data on the experiences of workers within government, particularly at the provincial level.

For example:

- What challenges do provincial public servants face in engaging with digital governance on a daily basis?
- How do challenges vary among central and line departments?
- Are barriers experienced by service delivery agencies different than policy shops?
- What types of practical innovations can support digital transitions?

The Ontario Public Service subsequently provided funding to the DGP group to support its digital research agenda.

To explore these issues, we conducted a two-day consultation with members of the Ontario Public Service on April 26th and 27th, 2018. A team of three researchers facilitated thirteen focus groups with over 60 participants (16 Deputy Ministers, 19 Assistant Deputy Ministers, and approximately 25 staff members, of varying levels and occupational classifications, from a range of OPS units). Following the Chatham House Rule, we present verbatim quotes to emphasize our observations, though without attribution. Each session lasted approximately two hours and followed a semi-structured format designed to elicit commentary on the implementation of digital governance in the OPS. The researchers' notes, together with notes taken by a research assistant observing five of the sessions, were cleaned and analyzed using

computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software designed to facilitate content and thematic analysis. Responses were categorized inductively and organized into themes.

This report proceeds as follows. The following section 'What We Heard' provides a summary of the main findings from the focus groups, identifying key themes regarding implementation of digital governance in the OPS. Section three, 'What To Do', discusses core governance challenges, sketches potential solutions and identifies areas of future research. The report concludes with a set of practical recommendations for the executive leadership of the OPS.

What We Heard:

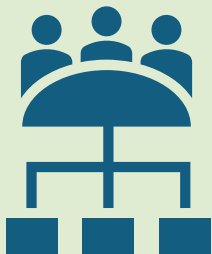
In response to our questions, participants described the ways in which digital technologies have impacted governance in the OPS. Staff detailed how social cultural shifts have changed expectations for service delivery and policy advice. They identified speed of response, volume of data, and integration of a broader range of stakeholders as key elements of these expectations.

Participants identified two main barriers hindering the OPS' transformation to "being digital":

1) Lack of Capacity



2) Bureaucratic Culture



The following section delves into these themes in more detail.

CHANGING CITIZEN EXPECTATIONS FOR SERVICE DELIVERY

Participants across all levels of government confirmed the growing expectation among Ontario residents and citizens that government services should and could be coordinated and delivered online or through mobile technology. Citizens, staff argued, have a strong preference for integrated services, summarized as the desire to “tell us once.” Assistant Deputy Ministers (ADMs) were acutely aware of the value of designing services that follow Ontarians “from cradle to grave,” but ADMs were also strongly attuned to the challenges inherent in this fundamental shift. As one ADM noted,

“Society has moved to individualized service from a cultural standpoint, but government, in our legislative regulatory role was never designed for that level of individualization. [Government is focused on] the broad public interest as opposed to the individual interest. Pressure is good, but getting the balance right is hard.”

Participants identified significant variation in service delivery across government, but also within ministries. For example the online health card is an example of a “crisp and elegant” digital solution for residents. On the other hand, death registries in Ontario are still stored primarily in a physical repository. **Across departments, the ability of government to provide digital services varies, with significant gains in larger ministries (e.g. Health) but less so in smaller departments or agencies with less capacity (e.g. Municipal Affairs).**

Staff from all levels of government stressed that citizens expect rapid response times, a pressure which is compounded through the instantaneous

nature of social media platforms such as Twitter for example. The expectation for speedy response times, while understandable, puts public servants in the difficult situation of explaining the intricacies of bureaucratic hurdles and inefficiencies to the public in an attempt to become more transparent. One staff person pointed to the apt characterization of a former Federal Minister of Digital noting that

“We are a Blockbuster government providing service to a Netflix citizenry.” (Trendall 2017)

The discussions recognized that citizens often see large private institutions – such as banks – as comparators to government. While some staff understood this, many were ambivalent about whether government could or should adopt private sector models of digital governance.

A recurring theme that is a unique challenge for the Ontario government is legislated privacy requirements.

- This is a constraint that the private sector does not have to consider to the same extent.
- Participants stressed that because citizens know and expect that banks can secure their private banking matters, they assume that governments should be able to do the same.
- In reality, coordination and sharing of personal data across ministries and departments is often stymied by privacy legislation and/or the perception of risk, a theme which we explore in more detail below.

Overall, the picture presented by OPS participants is that, although user-driven services are an important goal, government is still in the early stages of being able to lever those approaches, and that data is not always available or used in strong enough feedback loops to inform policymaking.

CHANGING GOVERNMENT EXPECTATIONS FOR POLICY ADVICE

Decision Makers Expect Immediate Access to Information Unavailable to Ministries

Another theme consistently arising in the discussions was that digital technologies and open data have substantially impacted the provision of policy advice. Just as citizens anticipate that government services can be provided in an instantaneous manner, so do decision makers expect that information can be accessed at the “snap of a finger.”

Participants stressed that the sheer volume of information and data can be overwhelming. On the one hand, the opportunities for generating solid policy advice based on refined data and evidence have substantially increased. Respondents from a variety of policy areas -- from agricultural to social policy -- noted that digital technologies have enabled the deepening of government officials’ understanding of policy impacts at a granular level. On the other hand, improved internal access to data is tempered by ministers’ access to a variety of external information sources, which the OPS cannot control, and reduces the OPS’s centrality in providing advice. As one Deputy Minister commented:

“We no longer as a Ministry have a monopoly on information. The paradigm where we were the masters of policy advice is gone, and we find ourselves trying to help both Ministers and staff understand what they are pursuing on the web is perhaps not the right solution. This shift makes

us more introspective and thoughtful and broadens spectrum of ideas. There is a constant pressure of ‘why can’t we do this?’”

Some participants noted that the broadened spectrum of information sources can sometimes clash with findings generated from big or open data, leading to tensions between evidence and beliefs, and the realities of implementation through the public service.

Information Overload Leads To Analysis Paralysis

Participants also noted that demands for comprehensive and rapid data provision can (somewhat ironically) *delay* decision making, generating an “analysis paralysis.” One participant noted: “The older model was to make the best decision based on uncertainty. Now it is to ask one more question because there must be more information out there.” As with service delivery, respondents highlighted a disjuncture between external expectations regarding open data and internal realities. Although perception within government is often that the private sector is a comparator, the provincial government faces fundamental challenges in accessing, cleaning, sharing, and managing data, all of which make data analysis difficult.

“To turn in a different way, depending on the problem are you trying to solve, or the outcome are you trying to achieve, you may or may not have the right data. There are people in the private sector making billion dollar decisions based on AI. So what are our expectations – we can’t compete with King and Bay [financial district in Toronto] in terms of our capacity and ability. I see private sector stakeholders coming into policy decision sphere they have a different approach that we



cannot duplicate. Stakeholders are thus bringing forward policy ideas that we are not in a place to adopt.”

Deputy ministers, ADMs and staff pointed to the impacts of digital on the role of citizenry and stakeholder groups in providing information and feedback on government services, programs, and policies. Whether responding to an online survey about new regulations at the end of a workday, posting on Twitter about changes to a social program, or designing an app to locate electric car charging stations, stakeholders have a new range of opportunities to contribute to policy formulation and advice.

Despite these new possibilities, we heard that OPS leaders were unsure of how to evaluate and ascertain the credibility of different sources of information – for example, how to assess the representativeness of a certain sample of online feedback from residents. In another vein, some participants were frustrated that the government still tends to use digital technologies as methods for *transmitting* information rather than *engaging* the public. As one ADM noted, “government continues to use social media as broadcast medium, and responses to stock questions, not for engagement. We are tweeting instead of using traditional press releases. We have not necessarily increased engagement.”

Misalignment of Data With Policy

Many of the participants pointed to the challenges of integrating data into policy advice and analysis. That in some cases there simply was not enough data, or that expectations far outpaced the current state of data availability. A staff member described the human and technical challenges inherent in harnessing the power of “big data” for policy advising:

“When it comes to advising with data, and engaging executive teams, every ministry is different with respect to their challenges, culture, leadership, demands for data-informed analysis, and level of data capabilities. There is a need to build trust over time, which is essentially a matter of understanding and changing organizational behavior. Data analytics teams must be multi-dimensional; so, too, those who carry the advice to executives and ministers. It is all a matter of culture and also matter of ‘story-telling’ to animate, draw out and contextualize the data.”

To summarize, policy shops with the OPS are facing diverse streams of information from a variety of sources and with differing qualities. The increased flow and diversity of information provides a significant opportunity for providing robust policy advice, but requires a new mix of human and technical capacities to analyze data and information, a theme we explore below.

BARRIERS TO BEING DIGITAL: LACK OF CAPACITY

Participants highlighted three main areas of lack of capacity in the OPS:

- Data Management
- Technical Resources
- Human Capacity

Data Management

Staff stressed the difficulties inherent in accessing, cleaning, and sharing data. Staff



noted that although they were aware their departments collected data relevant to their work, it often proved difficult to access through the IT cluster. As one staff person explained:

“Data is there but takes too long to get it, often months. We have an immense amount of information from case management but you have to put in a request. If you receive the information months later, you can’t make a business decision. At the moment if I need the information right now I have to file an emergency request.”

Indeed, a key barrier to using big data, staff stressed, was that data gathered within ministries often needs to be cleaned, requiring technical expertise. ADMs and staff noted that privacy legislation limited the sharing of data: one ADM commented “we are sitting on a goldmine of data, but can’t release it because of privacy concerns. We are dealing with legacy systems premised on “privacy by design” and data held in silos.” On the staff level, coordinating the sharing of data across ministries remains intricate and complex, requiring multiple agreements to be negotiated. Data sets often need extensive cleaning; it is often easier for staff to contract with outside vendors to link datasets than to negotiate agreements and share data within government.

Lack of Basic Technical Resources

We consistently heard that staff did not have access to basic digital tools to facilitate an efficient work environment, such as YouTube, Google, Skype or Flickr. By and large, staff members were disgruntled with Ontario.ca, noting that in some cases their ministry had lost depth in its online presence. **They appreciated the standardized format and simplicity of text, but pointed to the fact that hard-earned substantive expertise was no longer readily available for those who wanted more than the basic program or service information.**

Participants were also often frustrated with the file-sharing programs used in the OPS such as MS SharePoint. Some departments have started using cloud-based services such as Slack and Yammer but noted difficulties in obtaining formal approval from IT clusters. **What was apparent in discussions was a lack of consistency across departments** – although staff in central agencies can be quite deft with many digital tools, counterparts in smaller ministries have fewer opportunities to access technical resources.

Another significant technological barrier facing the OPS is the impact of legacy investments, for example, case management systems. The sunk costs, often of significant magnitude, make it very difficult for ministries to switch to cloud-based technologies. Prior investments in IT systems and platforms, as well as the costs of new investments and ensuring continuity, can exert a strong hold on subsequent decision making, limiting options and reducing the incentive for investing in state-of-the-art systems which could facilitate more agile digital governance. One ADM noted,

“We are a long-lived organization so we developed our tech over a long period of time. We are in the same boat as the banks, but they are ahead because they had a financial incentive to take online banking into a sales mode. The challenge is, if you want to get to a heart of offering better service, then you have to take into account the complexity has to be dealt with.”

Human Capacity: Digital Literacy & Data Analysis

All participants pointed the lack of digital literacy as a fundamental challenge. ADMs and staff of policy shops in smaller ministries reported

limitations in data analysis skills among staff. On the other hand, larger ministries establish partnership agreements with outside agencies in order to expertly mine data for the ministry's needs. At the leadership level, participants noted the difficulties inherent in finding "T-shaped" people: employees who understand business problems and can apply technical knowledge to generate solutions. Several Assistant Deputy Ministers stressed the challenges of retaining digitally-savvy talent in the OPS, noting that the expectations of new hires for engagement, collaboration, and impact are not always aligned with the culture and slowness of hierarchy of government in a Westminster system. Participants indicated that there were pockets of innovators across the OPS, but that leadership needs to be practical about the government's ability to compete with the private sector for talent. As one ADM argued

"We compete and hire the best, but when they get here, they don't have access to the technology they expect and so they leave for better opportunities. We need to attract people who are willing to work with old software and legacy systems, even if having been hired because they understand the state of the art."

Staff-level participants stressed difficulties in finding time for training, noting that management's commitment to skills updating often conflicts with business priorities. Staff commented that digital literacy, in particular, is built through opportunities to "play" with new ways of working, new tools, and data. This type of training is time-intensive and not well suited to traditional "workshop" models of professional development. Overall, staff argued for additional "space, time, and budget" to keep pace with changing expectations.

BARRIERS TO BEING DIGITAL: BUREAUCRATIC CULTURE

Beyond problems with technical and human capacities, participants at all levels identified the existing bureaucratic OPS culture as a significant barrier to effective digital governance. Our discussions suggested that executives and staff see middle managers (young and old alike) as the "clay" that can slow down the adoption of digital reforms.

Staff stressed that although direct managers often support increased collaboration and agility, innovation is rarely rewarded at that level. Accordingly, middle managers have little incentive to divert resources to implement digital priorities at the expense of day-to-day business deliverables. As one participant noted, "it is easier to maintain the status quo than to drive change – in order to put in a business case to get open access for my whole staff I need to put in extra work and the time to do it – I can't do that when I'm fighting fires all the time." Similarly, another staff described the culture as a "generational challenge," noting, "many of our leaders were brought up in a vertical, siloed, centralized system." In such an environment digital innovators feel isolated, working against a resistant, risk adverse system, and in need of support.

Open Data Increases Risk-Aversion

Participants stressed that the wellspring of organizational resistance to leveraging digital tools is perceptions of risk, especially with regard to privacy strictures, security issues, or political repercussions. At the executive level, participants acknowledged that the OPS lags behind the private sector partially because of low tolerance among citizens and politicians for significant error. For example, although private entities (e.g. Facebook, Equifax) can weather substantial data breaches, a sitting Ontario government would likely not. Some ADMs

argued that shifts in societal culture have made leaders *more risk averse*:

“I actually think digital age has made us more hierarchical – from what I remember from OPS in younger, as an analyst, I might go to support someone at a committee. I even was on a talk show once. Now there is 24/7 media coverage online and everyone is afraid that if they send a staff person to a particular event and there is a mistake made, it will become viral.”

Indeed, fears around control of information and political blowback have led some executives to rely more heavily on command-control styles of leadership.

The executives and staff alike stressed that balancing open data with privacy risks is essentially a matter of judgement. In the absence of strong organizational incentives to reward innovation, direct managers will often push responsibility over to the central agencies or default to more conservative decisions. An ADM from a central agency noted that too many people ask for approvals not legally required in order to mitigate potential risks. A Deputy Minister commented: “there is a culture to overcome. You need to deal with the reaction of your own staff, who think ‘we can’t do that for privacy reasons, or what would the privacy commission do’ and say ‘no we’re good’.” A core element of risk assessment, noted staff, involves navigating between real and perceived risks. A staff person noted:

“FIPPA (*Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*) has a grey area for a reason [to provide government with the opportunity] to use good judgement, but a lot of people feel like they don’t get recognized in a positive light for using that good judgement.”

Effective leaders, participants argued, have a strong understanding of what constitutes reasonable risk.

Excessive Approvals Inhibit Digital Adoption

Participants said that there were too many approvals and sign-offs required for ministries (and staff) to adopt new digital solutions. For many staff members, the need to develop a business case in to procure a particular technology from their IT cluster was a barrier for adopting digital tools. IT leadership stressed that a core challenge in adopting new technology is risk perception, noting that societal changes have generated a very low tolerance at the executive level for cyber security breaches.

At the Deputy level, participants cited the need for “17 approvals from the centre” as a key hindrance to becoming digital. One Deputy Ministry wryly noted “As Deputy Minister, I am prepared to accept more responsibility and accountability for realized risks, including getting fired, in exchange for far fewer approvals from various central institutions.”

Underlying much of the discussion on bureaucratic culture was ongoing worry about accountability, particularly with respect to ethical and moral issues related to governments’ custodial role vis a vis data. Participants voiced concerns as to whether the OPS was able or ready to make the case for true ‘openness’ and transparency. As one ADM noted,

“People in government are worried about losing data and this is a culture change, it takes a lot of time to get used to the idea that we are going to lose control. This is a change in governance, but we may still get what we need! There are some new ideas and new directions, but people are used to their

comfort levels and want to maintain that control”

Overall, our findings from the discussions suggest that public servants at all levels of the OPS agree that adopting digital tools and embracing the precepts of effective digital governance will require significant and substantial transformation in the culture of the public service. This transformation involves strong messaging and communications from senior officials and more importantly, sustained efforts of putting new cultures and ways of doing work into practice.

BENEFITS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF “BECOMING DIGITAL”

We asked participants to identify potential opportunities for furthering the digital agenda. **Several executives level suggested that collaboration on open data – whether with citizens, the private sector, or academia – has the potential to substantially improve the effectiveness of government service and policy design.** Different ministries have begun to realize the benefits of engaging expertise outside of government, sharing examples such as releasing data to a private company to develop an app for mapping electric car charging stations, releasing public accounts, analysing the effectiveness of seniors programs, or hosting a hackathon on blockchain in government. As an ADM noted,

“Open data is needed to better understand society in multiple areas and part of the dispersal of expertise throughout society, where government is no longer the controller of conversations. This connects to user-centred design, to engage citizens and

stakeholders much earlier in the policy process and move it up the food chain.”

From a public engagement perspective, some participants noted the potential for digital tools to significantly build transparency into government decision-making, thus building trust. Finally, a few participants noted that the OPS has the opportunity to draw lessons from the experience of other jurisdictions and institutions, such as the UK, Europe, banks, and the courts, in adopting and taking advantage of digital technology and sensibilities.

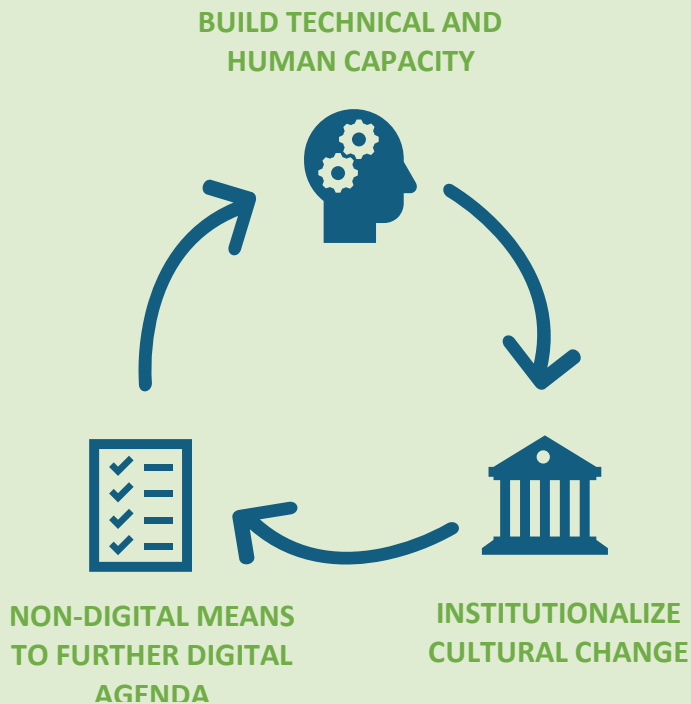
In sum, our consultations yielded insight into the pressures on furthering digital governance in the OPS. Given the changing expectations for user-driven services and policy advice drawn from big data and multiple sources of information, public servants face ongoing challenges in navigating gaps in technical and human capacity, data management, and bureaucratic culture. Our findings complement earlier scans which identified legacy technology, legislative and administrative hurdles, access to data, bureaucratic culture, and political resistance as key barriers to Canadian governments in achieving digital transformations (Johal, Galley, and Molson 2014).



What to do? Observations and Ideas to Consider:

The OPS has an ambitious agenda on digital governance for the future. Documents like **OPS of the Future** and **Start with Users** set out a fundamentally new vision of providing seamless, passionate, and innovative services to, for, and with citizens (Government of Ontario 2018a, 2018b).

These plans require a transformative shift in the practices, institutions, and processes of government, with shifting traditional public-service culture likely more important than investing in digital IT infrastructure. These findings could provide a baseline for monitoring progress in addressing key governance challenges facing executives in the OPS as they implement this vision (Government of Ontario 2018a). We suggest that the barriers described by DMs, ADMs and raise a series of governance opportunities for the leadership of the OPS to consider.



SEEK STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD TECHNICAL AND HUMAN CAPACITY

One overarching finding was that “becoming digital” will entail significant cultural change in organizational practices. While this transformation likely requires recruiting new talent with established skills in managing big data and digital governance over the longer term, in the short term the OPS could also foster initiatives to better support and **amplify the work of “T-shaped people”**. **That is, not experts in one thing (I-shaped) or generalist, a “t-shaped person” is an expert in at least one thing but also somewhat capable in many other things.**

We heard that education and training for executives and staff on digital readiness would help facilitate change, especially those that include alternative training formats, for example by embedding skills development into ongoing projects, or incorporating behavioural “nudges.” At the very least, proper risk management training for middle management, especially encouraging and supporting managers to identify situations where they can exercise their own judgement on data sharing or public engagement practices, will likely be beneficial.

Another avenue for supporting existing digital innovators in the OPS is to build new business cases for digital solutions. Executives participating in the discussions stressed that although digital governance can often result in business-process gains or cost-savings this frame tends to undermine long-term growth. As one ADM argued:

“The language of cost savings needs to change. Digital needs to be seen as an investment, not a cost-reduction measure. And we are investing not just in hardware – we need to invest in people too. We need a

generation to see a return on our investment. Everyone needs to see that is not a ‘quick win’ situation, but rather, a generational shift, and likely beyond the next generation.”

Instead of selling digital as a cost-saver, executives need to make the case that digital governance can further policy priorities by developing sophisticated and targeted solutions. At the same time, implementation will be more rapid if leadership understands that new digital solutions require building better, more sophisticated internal capacity.

DEVELOP INITIATIVES THAT CAN SPUR ON AND INSTITUTIONALIZE CULTURAL CHANGE.

Another key area of support is to examine practices and processes that support top officials to drive and sustain change down through ministries, while also managing up and out. Focused attention to reducing the layers of administrative and legislative approvals will significantly increase opportunities for data sharing within and across departments.

We also found substantial variation among public servants’ understanding of existing risk management frameworks, especially with regard to federal and provincial privacy legislation, even at the ADM level. The OPS needs new strategies for incentivizing risk taking and empowering innovation, especially at the middle management level.

Finally, more research is needed to assess the efficacy of existing accountability and reporting mechanism for monitoring the implementation of digital governance in the OPS. What are the measurement indicators of success? How would the OPS know if the digital transformations envisioned by the plans are on track? Tasking a new ADM-level staff or creating a small unit to



responsible for digital implementation and performance management could significantly boost attention on strategic and operational outcomes.





USING NON-DIGITAL FUNDAMENTAL SHIFTS TO FURTHER THE DIGITAL AGENDA.

The OPS must better seize opportunities to drive its digital modernization agenda through other non-digital shifts in where and how it works. From ministerial reorganizations to new and adapted physical workspaces, the OPS can leverage opportunities for digital change. This can involve thinking about how ministries and units are organized, for instance placing policy and operational units in closer physical proximity, or integrating them with user and data and design specialists. Breaking down physical silos by integrating staff into more interdisciplinary teams and furthering the ability of telework and other virtual working arrangements should be explored.

Policy and program reviews, both automatic and directed, must trigger mandatory re-assessments of digital readiness. These are crucial opportunities for the OPS to revisit basic program and service design and structure, as well as how data from such services and programs is captured and put to use. Relatedly, the OPS needs to make better use of HR planning and operational reviews as key drivers of embedding digital into the public service. Both senior OPS staff and managers need to better utilize staff learning plans as a vehicle to develop digital literacy and upskill OPS staff systematically.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, we propose 8 recommendations for the OPS executive leadership to improve digital policy implementation in the short term.

-  **1. Propose that the Cabinet Secretary and the Treasury Board prioritize developing a leaner process for digital security approvals.** The proposal would also outline new executive responsibilities in this regard, perhaps by establishing a new Deputy Minister responsible for digital implementation.
-  **2. Develop an OPS digital innovation platform to promote information sharing and incentivize digital thinking in the OPS.** The innovation platform (online hubs, events, staff networks) would showcase different cases of progress, success, and failures in the OPS. The primary aim would be to strengthen the existing community of innovators within the OPS, while also supporting recruitment initiatives.
-  **3. Conduct a systematic review of recruitment, retention, and professional development needs of executives and staff with regard to digital readiness.** This assessment would include a review of available digital skills, competencies and existing training resources.
-  **4. Develop targeted tools and resources for different staffing levels to foster digital transformation.** Resources could include short guides for executives to champion digital within ministries, or risk assessment resources for managers. Professional development

practices could also be streamlined to facilitate managers' ability to drive staff training and learning. One method may be to develop performance evaluation practices that enable managers to link staff learning plans with digital competencies in a more systematic manner.

-  **5. Tackle the 'clay' middle.** Enable middle managers to address the requirements of digital by freeing up space and resources for them to implement and promote staff actions as noted above. Create incentives for managers to ensure their staff are taking controlled risks, and looking to maximize digital ways of doing (e.g. user research, iterative policy, program, and service design).
-  **6. Commission a digital governance green paper to review existing OPS risk frameworks,** detailing legislative and administrative barriers to digital transformations in the OPS, especially with regard to data management.
-  **7. Develop OPS case study research to examine digital instruments, practices, and transformations occurring in the OPS,** and in other jurisdictions, to identify leverage points for accelerating cultural change within government.
-  **8. Become a leader in digital performance management.** Develop stronger cultures and practices of rigorous and comprehensive data driven evaluation of how well digital is working through integrating greater assessment and feedback mechanisms.

Conclusion

The Ontario Public Service has embarked on a significant transition to becoming digital. With continued investments in digital government services, the OPS can lever its existing investments and continue to benefit from its early adoption of digital. It can make further substantial steps to refocus the public service to become more innovative and agile as it shifts toward user-centered design. The OPS has created a substantial planning framework for transformation; this report explores emerging opportunities and threats to effective implementation of this vision.

Based on our dialogue with a sample of OPS Deputy Ministers, Assistant Deputy Ministers, and staff, we understand that the OPS is in the midst of navigating changing expectations for service delivery and policy advice. Across ministries, there are major changes proceeding with regard to the speed and intensity of work, data management, and stakeholder engagement. Although participants were positive about many of these changes – for example, the ability to parse policy information at a much more granular level – many were troubled by the lack of technical capacity and platforms, and a bureaucratic culture not aligned with the demands of the digital era.

Despite the government's commitment to digital literacy, we heard that many workers face daily hurdles in accessing simple digital tools or sharing data. Legacy IT systems, complex centralized approvals processes, and poorly cleaned or incomplete data make it difficult for staff to engage in iterative experimentation. From a skills and competencies perspective, public servants were also concerned about the lack of support within the bureaucracy for “t-shaped people” capable of bridging the technical and business spheres of work.

We heard that hierarchal management structures, department silos, and risk averse

behaviours as key barriers to digital transformations. These challenges are not unique to the OPS; indeed our research finds that most representative democracies are struggling with merging digital and existing governance structures, practices, and instruments. Nevertheless, our consultations also identified key levers which could generate significant feedback effects in triggering digital transformations. By close monitoring of these elements of implementation, the OPS will be well positioned to continue building momentum toward considerable organizational change.



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