



Centre for
Public Impact

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Briefing Bulletin:

Going digital

*How governments can use technology to
transform lives around the world*

A few years ago, a British citizen needing to renew a driving licence would have taken a trip to the post office to fill out a sheaf of forms, before visiting a photo booth for a new set of passport pictures.

Today that same citizen spends 10 minutes filling in an online form, while the photos are automatically retrieved from his or her passport application and the new licence drops through the letter box four days later. In Estonia, meanwhile, entrepreneurs can set up a new business online in less than 20 minutes, including all the necessary background checks.¹

These are just two examples of how online access to public services – and the ability of different government functions to share data behind the scenes – has enabled citizens to enjoy smooth and efficient interactions with the state.

Processes that once required correspondence by letter, face-to-face interactions, or long periods of time spent on hold with a call centre are now automated. This has freed up time and money to be spent on frontline services where the human touch *is* necessary – such as schools, hospitals and job coaches for the unemployed – or on ensuring that the people who really need help and assistance can actually get it.

But digital government is about more than automation. Administrations are using the internet to engage with citizens in all kinds of ways, as the following three examples demonstrate:

Social media

In October 2014, India's prime minister Narendra Modi launched the nationwide Clean India campaign by tweeting a picture of himself sweeping a Delhi street. He encouraged the public to follow his lead and soon thousands were helping to tidy parks and other public areas.²

“Gamification”

The US military's popular, free-to-play online game, *America's Army*, allows young people to explore what life might be like in the armed forces – while running recruitment ads between levels. It is one example of a growing trend among governments of finding interactive ways to engage citizens and civil servants.³

The Internet of Things (“IoT”)

While we are only just beginning to see the potential of the IoT for public services, government officials are already looking forward to a not-too-distant future where smart devices usher in the next wave of the e-government revolution. Think roads that can tell local authorities that they're warm enough not to need gritting in winter, and waste bins that send a signal to the rubbish collection service when they need emptying.⁴

The challenges of getting there

The starting position for different countries seeking to embrace digital government varies hugely. It is worth remembering that over 55% of the world's population are not yet online. Many developing countries face inadequate infrastructure that prevents widespread connectivity, while poor rates of literacy – digital and otherwise – hamper administrations' ability to exploit the benefits of the internet.⁵

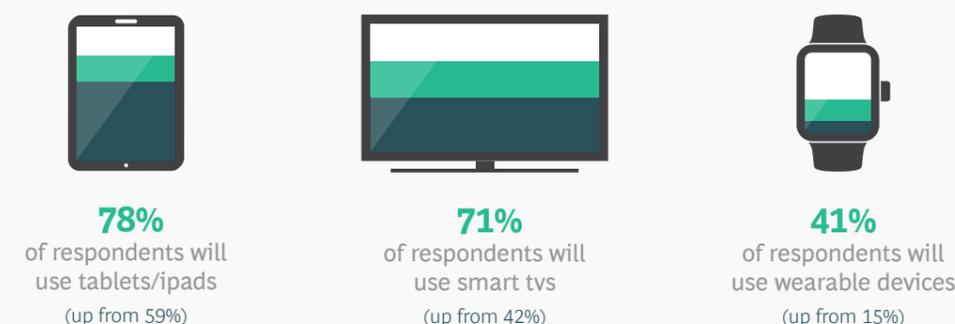
Even for developed countries that are trying to reap the rewards of digital government, some common challenges exist. These include:

The structure and culture of government

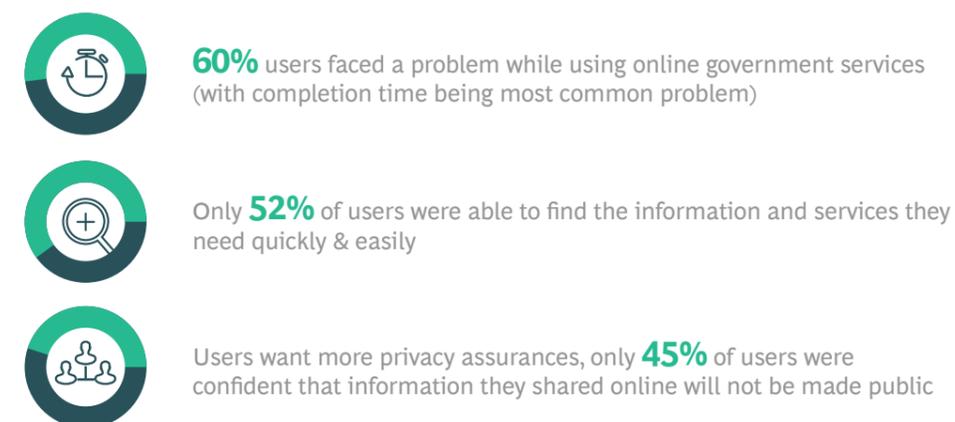
Some governments, like the UK's, are based on a departmental model which can create boundaries that don't exist in the real lives of citizens. A siloed structure of government, comprising individual fiefdoms with their own ways of working, can make delivering joined-up digital services a huge challenge. Just ask Mike Bracken, the founder of the UK's Government Digital Service (GDS). The mission of his centralised tech team – launched in 2011 with the backing of the cabinet minister Francis Maude – was nothing less than to revolutionise the UK government's digital operations.

To achieve its aim, the GDS had to be counter-cultural, disruptive, and willing to step on departmental toes. Into an inherently risk-averse system, it arrived as an insurgent force, championing “agile” working and a Google mentality of “fail small, fail fast”. By 2012, GDS had built GOV.UK, a single platform that replaced thousands of disparate government websites. The success of this and other innovations prompted governments around the world to follow suit: the GDS model was copied in, for example, the US and Australia. A huge achievement – but Bracken and Maude have the scars on their backs to prove it.⁶

Governments should design content to work across multiple devices and platforms. User platforms are evolving. In three years:



Governments also need to focus on ease of use and trust:



Source: 2016 BCG digital government survey

Vast and costly legacy IT systems

Governments have historically tied themselves into lengthy, inflexible and hugely expensive IT contracts with major suppliers – an arrangement which hampers innovation and transformation, and inevitably leaves the public sector lagging behind the private sector. The US government consultant William Eggers has pointed out that, of the \$90 billion the Federal Government spends on technology, “75% of that spending goes on maintaining antiquated legacy systems, some of which are up to 40 years old”.⁷

Addressing this situation requires courage. Ushering in digital services fit for the 21st century may necessitate abandoning large IT contracts midway through, even if this means – in the words of Francis Maude – “money down the drain”.

“Big Brother” state

The more information a government has about its citizens, and the more joined up that information is, the easier it is to deliver hassle-free digital public services. Estonia – often held up as the posterchild for e-government – has a “once only” policy, whereby if a citizen has given details to one government agency, no other part of government needs to request it again.⁸

This is possible because of Estonia's ID card system: all citizens have one, and this translates into a unique digital identity. But while such a model is a boon to digital government, in countries with a strong emphasis on civil liberties, and a more sceptical view of the state, it is far harder to realise. Britain and Australia have tried and failed to introduce ID cards and look unlikely to try this approach again in the near future.

1 <https://e-estonia.com/e-residents/services-and-benefits/>

2 <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/articles/feature/new-broom-big-society>

3 <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/articles/feature/gamification-when-governments-their-game>

4 <https://www.publictechnology.net/articles/features/matching-vision-investment-how-councils-can-benefit-iot>

5 <http://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/unlocking-digital-door-developing-countries/>

6 Maude and Bracken podcast <http://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/article/in-conversation-with-francis-maude-and-mike-bracken/>

7 <http://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/opening-digital-playbook/>

8 <https://www.publictechnology.net/articles/features/%E2%80%99Country-was-start-up%E2%80%9D-lessons-estonia-and-why-true-e-government-requires>

How are governments doing?

According to civic tech expert Tom Steinberg: “There are significant, relatively well-run wealthy countries that are more or less nowhere in terms of ‘getting’ digital: Germany and Canada to take two examples.”⁹

Yet other nations that fit into Steinberg’s category of “relatively well-run and wealthy” are doing far better. In 2016, the UK topped the UN’s annual E-Government Index, with Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Singapore also scoring highly.

Even in developing countries, governments are benefiting from digital trends that might have seemed impossible a few years ago. In the aftermath of the devastating Nepal earthquake in April 2015, the use of open government data meant that relief workers had crucial information such as hospital locations and water sources at their fingertips, immediately accessible and all in the same place.¹⁰

Overall, the UN points to “a sharp rise in the number of countries that are using e-government to provide public services online through one-stop-platforms”. It also notes that, while in 2003 only 33 countries provided online transactions, in 2016 there were 148 countries offering at least one form of online transactional service.¹¹

Golden rules for success

Put citizens’ needs first

Approach digital public services from the perspective of the citizen rather than the government. This may involve disrupting established structures, but it will ultimately pay dividends.

Think small, think big

The startup mentality of piloting ideas works well for front-end websites and apps, but nimble and agile projects have to be incorporated into a broader approach that can succeed on a much larger scale.

Strong leadership

Overhauling systems and bringing about a digital revolution requires strong leaders at both the administrative and political level. If civil service innovators have the backing of elected politicians, they are much more likely to succeed.

Create allies not enemies

Digital leaders must be relentless in their drive for change – or see their ambitions overcome by the forces of inertia. Yet disruptors who antagonise their allies risk losing the support that is essential to success.

9 <http://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/pushing-people-power-technology/>

10 <http://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/open-data-unlocking-development-potential-in-africa-and-asia/>

11 <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UN-E-Government-Survey-2016>



The Centre for Public Impact is a global not-for-profit foundation, funded by The Boston Consulting Group, dedicated to improving the positive impact of governments.

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