



By Diaan-Yi Lin | December 2016

# What makes Singapore's government a digital leader – and how it might do better

With a government that consistently ranks among the world's best for digital capabilities and achievements, the city-state is an inspiring place for digitally-minded public servants.

When my McKinsey colleagues were working on their new white paper about how governments can transform themselves with digital technology, one of the first places they looked to for ideas was Singapore. With a government that consistently ranks among the world's best for digital capabilities and achievements, the city-state is an inspiring place for digitally-minded public servants. To give one recent example, Singapore's civil service has started using Facebook's professional platform for internal communications.

How has Singapore done it? Here are what I see as the most distinctive elements of Singapore's digital-government formula, along with a few ideas for improvement.

**The government's big-picture goals are highly ambitious.** Singaporeans are known for their humility and reserve in many respects. (Indeed, the description "not bad" counts as high praise here.) But in the digital realm, the government's goals have been the opposite of modest, dating back to the first e-Government Action Plan in 2000.

Today, the guiding documents for Singapore's digital government efforts, including the Infocomm Media 2025 plan, set extremely ambitious aims, such as becoming number one in the world in using digital technology to create economic and social value. These goals have challenged Singapore's public officials and agencies to devote considerable creativity, effort, and resources to achieving them.

*How Singapore can improve:* Many government services have been digitized to a great extent, making them easier, faster, and more satisfying for citizens. Convincing more citizens to use digital services is the next step. There are opportunities to promote digital services because of their quality and broader benefits of helping the government operate more efficiently. The government might clarify how major initiatives like Smart Nation, which advances technology-enabled solutions to urban challenges, will improve life for citizens on a day-to-day basis.

**Government leaders have been outspoken digital champions.** Few governments have had their leaders align themselves with digital efforts as closely and visibly as Singapore's. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong—who concentrated in computer science and math at university—has been a particularly strong proponent of Singapore's digital government efforts.

He initiated Singapore's Smart Nation program, housing the program in his office. And when he met with US President Barack Obama in August 2016, the two leaders announced that Singapore and the United States would step up their cooperation on digital innovation and smart cities. Prime Minister Lee even shared on Facebook the lines of code he'd written in C++ for solving Sudoku puzzles. Other senior government leaders wear digital hats, too: Minister for Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan leads the Smart Nation program.

*How Singapore can improve:* Leaders at high levels of Singapore's government have been enthusiastic public sponsors of digital initiatives. Individual agencies, though, do not always know where to turn for official direction of their digitization efforts. This is because several entities, including the Government Technology Agency (popularly known as GovTech) and the Smart Nation Programme Office, each have responsibility for some of Singapore's digital programs. Clarifying their responsibilities could improve the situation.

**Many groups have a say in the government's digital strategy.** One of Singapore's signature initiatives for shaping the digital-government strategy, along with a 50-year economic strategy and other national strategies, is its Committee on the Future Economy. As part of its work on these strategies, the committee has been gathering input from its members across sectors, including government, business, labor, and academia.

The committee's consultative approach has enabled officials to better fit the government's digital strategy to the needs of multiple constituencies, including citizens, residents, and businesses.

I've heard a number of stories from business leaders in Singapore about how digital efforts in the public sector have pushed their businesses to digitize more quickly than they might have otherwise, resulting in cost savings and value creation.

*How Singapore can improve:* While the government has involved various outside groups in setting its digital agenda, relatively few of the government's digital plans have been targeted at groups that are less digitally oriented. This is especially true for older Singaporeans, known as the Pioneer Generation. As government leaders plan the next phase in their digital strategy, they might also solicit the input of groups that have been less well served to date.

**Recruiting digital talent has been a priority.** So far, the central agencies that oversee the government's digital transformation have attracted high-quality digital staff. The opening of Hive, the Software Design and Development Centre of Excellence, to provide technology services to other government agencies, speaks to the government's progress in assembling a digital workforce.

To build Singapore's pipeline of digital talent, the government is investing in citizens' skills. It has launched a three-year program to teach computer programming to 500,000 young people. And the SkillsFuture program helps workers pay for training to keep their capabilities current in the digital economy.

*How Singapore can improve:* Staffing the entire government with digital talent won't be easy. It could be helpful for GovTech, the InfoComm Media Development Authority, and other digitally oriented central departments to share their recruiting approaches with other agencies, and perhaps to serve as feeders of talent. Appointing digital leaders to agencies might also attract like-minded talent.

The level of ambition, leadership commitment, and broad-based strategy for digitization have enabled the government to digitize many of its interactions with businesses and citizens and streamline back-end processes, creating efficiencies and cost savings. If past experience is any guide, Singapore will continue to raise the bar for digital government. Developing leaders, reaching out to more citizens and institutions, and strengthening recruiting efforts are a few places to start.

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