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Public & Social Sector Practice

Building the tech-enabled government of the future—a 'Day 1' list of common pitfalls

If you can recognize and avoid them, you can make your programs more successful—quickly. Start on your very first day.

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October 2020

Day 1 in your new role as a senior government leader has come. The ceremonies, speeches, and transition events created lots of memories. Now it's time for you and your team to act. You're excited about the government of the future but aren't sure where to start. You know it will involve technologies, but which technologies? How and when should they be deployed?

First, you and your team take stock of your organization's in-flight efforts. As you work through the stack of briefing documents, recurring themes emerge. Phrases such as "digital transformation," "agile," "lean," "tech enablement," "automation," "advanced analytics," "artificial intelligence," and "machine learning" appear repeatedly. *Are these just buzz words?*, you wonder. *What actually needs to happen in my organization? What are the right tools and programs to get the job done?*

The stakes have never been higher, with additional budget constraints and rising citizen (and workforce) expectations on the horizon. The many successful adaptations in the face of COVID-19 showed that the government of the future can deliver services more effectively and efficiently and inspire employees by enabling them to spend their time on significant, intellectually engaging activities rather than repetitive, manual ones. These changes in service delivery can also liberate funds for organizations to reallocate to better serve the ever-evolving needs of citizens and the workforce in a more agile way.

To help you understand and evaluate your organization's in-flight efforts, we have used our experiences in thousands of digital transformations across the public and private sectors to distill a list of 11 common pitfalls. Organized across the dimensions of strategy, capabilities, technology, and change management, our list can help you review your organization's efforts on Day 1.

Strategy

1. Getting lost along the way. The lead time needed to build new digital, analytics, and automation capabilities means that technology programs often outlast administrations. Such programs may fall out of sync with new priorities. Align each program with the strategic direction of the new administration and harness technology to deliver on its commitments as quickly as possible.

2. Letting a thousand flowers bloom. Although generating ideas from the bottom up can help you identify use cases and incubate new capabilities, an exclusively bottom-up approach risks missing opportunities that span multiple departments or lurk in the seams between them. Leaders should ensure that technology programs address the top priorities.

3. Losing sight of the customer. Too many technology solutions are designed for the organization that builds them rather than the citizens who use them. Incorporating experience-based design principles (for instance, behavioral psychology) into technology programs can help you and the team keep sight of your customers and their rising expectations.

Capabilities

4. Using complex, cumbersome procedures. Clear, simple ways of working can integrate people, assets, and vendors seamlessly. Agile practices (for instance, two-week sprint cycles and daily scrums to synchronize activities) help cross-functional teams to deliver solutions quickly and adapt to a rapidly changing technology landscape.

5. Focusing on the wrong things. Some programs focus too heavily on technical capabilities (such as migrating platforms and integrating systems) and lack clear sources of value (which can range from

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reallocating capacity to saving time to reducing error rates to improving quality). That can make it hard for technology programs to achieve attractive returns on investment. Sources of value should feature prominently in summaries of programs and drive decisions about them.

6. Outsourcing the learning curve. Organizations often need external vendors to deploy new capabilities cost effectively. But outsourcing everything can make it harder for governments to be self-sufficient, create unnecessary risks, and enfeeble organizations when issues arise. Building critical in-house roles and capabilities empowers organizations to operate and lead in a more digital, automated world.

Technology

7. Changing the "secret sauce." Some departments take a focused, deep approach to change (for instance, the end-to-end redesign and tech enablement of a single service). Others prefer a broad, shallow one (such as the tech enablement of an entire workforce). While either approach may be effective, a consistent deployment model can create economies of scale and help you use the same tools, approaches, talent, and procedures in a number of different departments.

8. Using too few levers. Programs often focus on applying a single technology lever (say, advanced analytics, digitization, or automation), which therefore becomes, at least in some cases, a solution looking for a problem. Using a number of levers and applying the most appropriate one in each step of the value stream can maximize efficiency.

9. Processing "garbage in." Data (and digital, structured inputs more broadly) are essential for getting value from technical capabilities. Nevertheless, you should avoid investments in collecting, cleaning, and analyzing data without first defining clear ways for using the data and pathways for capturing value.

10. Waiting for the next big thing. Narrow artificial intelligence is here, and it can discern patterns in data and use them to describe, predict, or prescribe (refer to our "Executive's Guide to AI" to learn more). No doubt, AI will become even more powerful over time. Yet the enhanced instrumentation of data sources—right now—can be at least as powerful as investments to build and deploy more complex algorithmic decision-support tools at some time in the future. Investments in the right AI that's available today can drive change in a fast, powerful way.

Change management

11. Focusing on machines, not people. Technological change can create myriad opportunities to make organizations more efficient and effective. But technology isn't enough; people must change as well. Change-management programs that extend well beyond simple communications to include training and role modeling can empower leaders and inspire them to change their ways of working and adopt new capabilities.

Your organization's ability to deliver on its mission—and your own legacy—will require you to build the government of the future quickly. If you can recognize these 11 common pitfalls in your organization, you can rapidly pivot to more successful efforts. Day 1 is the time to start.

Future posts in this series will illuminate additional considerations for building the government of the future.

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