The human factor in the digital transformation process of the Public Administration

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Presentation

The Public Sector Observatory (OSPI), the knowledge centre of Informática El Corte Inglés for Public Administration, organises a series of periodic meetings with specialists aimed at boosting the drive for digital transformation in the public sector.

This document is the result of the symposium that took place last February with the attendance of different experts in the field of management, public and private, technology, and human resources. Members of Public Administrations, representatives of private companies, business schools and associations, exchanged their points of view on the strategic role of people in the transformation process of the public sector and identified the main challenges of Digital Administration in the field of people management.

Introduction

The need to transform the traditional civil servant into a digital public employee was the argument with which the panel of experts started its debate about "The Human Factor in Digital Transformation". Under the premise of boosting digital change in the public employee and the transversality of a process that has no return, the moderator structured the debate into three large thematic blocks that specialists discussed throughout the meeting.

- Main challenges faced by the public sector in the digital transformation process and how the private sector can boost this transformation.

- The different phases in the public employee's lifecycle, from his selection until his departure from the system.

- The new professional profiles.

Placing people in the centre of the transformation process was the first challenge identified by the experts, who agreed on pointing out that in spite of the intrinsic importance of people, their role is often relegated as compared to technology or changes within an organisation. This is a cause of failure of many modernisation projects where people, far from the centre of change, where they should be acting as catalysts, end up taking minor roles in the final phases of the agendas.

The expert panel has also analysed some issues related to the lifecycle of the public employee, from selection to departure from the system, with a spotlight on the necessary internal reorganisation of the Administration itself. They have all agreed on the need to redesign procedures and architectures and transfer value to people's roles, boosting measures aimed at improving motivation and performance of the public employee.

Finally, the expert panel discussed the need to incorporate new professional profiles to the scope of the Public Administration, firstly to manage and analyse the huge volume of data that is generated and circulated in the public settings, and also to encourage innovation at all levels of the Administration. The employee that is sought is multidisciplinary, with "business" knowledge, who will bring a greater dynamism to the transformation process.

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General conclusions

- The main challenge is to take people into account in the agenda of digital transformation.

- It is necessary to approach an action plan of digital competencies for public employees, taking the European framework as a reference.

- We must understand that digital transformation is not something that only affects ICT units, but the organisation as a whole, which needs to be promoted globally in the framework of a transversal project.

- Transformation requires a real Change Management plan, with allocated resources, which brings about a new model, where agility and innovative culture are paramount. Maybe it is better to approach this change at two different speeds: one for the world of guarantees, of managerial levels, following established procedures and hierarchies, and another for exploration, for permanently listening to citizen needs, participation etc.

- A new professional profile that could be very useful in this phase of digitalisation is someone that would act as a "catalyst of digital transformation", with a transversal perspective, who may base their experience in other sectors or in providers that have already undertaken this process internally.

- Innovation must be institutionalised so that it attains visibility and recognition, apart from technology, which must be understood as an instrumental element which drives change.

- The creation of new regulations can be a requisite to approach some of the necessary changes, but laws by themselves do not solve problems, implementations do. And their impact must be appreciated.

Main challenges faced by the public sector in the digital transformation process and how the private sector can boost this transformation

The need to include the human factor in the agenda of digital transformation; the multidisciplinary condition of this transformation, that must include technological, cultural and business aspects; the acceleration of change brought about by the increasing digitalisation of society in general, were some of the main challenges identified by the experts at the start of the debate.

Circumscribing digital transformation to the technological area is a grave error, because change must be driven by the will, capacity and commitment of people, in an organisational model where different generations coalesce. Experts emphasised the need to help overcome the aversion that some people still feel for everything *digital* in order avoid failure in transformational projects.

There were also discussions about how to build human capital where more value is given to merit and capacity than to political confidence, and where innovation takes an essential part in the public service culture. For this purpose, they valued highly the transfer of experiences and talent from the private sector, adapted, of course, to the nature of Public Administrations.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- People must be placed in the centre of digital transformation processes.

- Although digital transformation is aimed at improving people's lives, it is often viewed as something that goes "against people".

- Digital transformation must be unattached from ICTs. It is more about a transversal process where technological, cultural and managerial aspects coalesce.

- How to instil confidence in the changes that are involved in the digital transformation in the day to day work of the Administration. This is a key aspect of organisations in which the mean age of public employees is relatively high.

- To facilitate digital transformation, talent management must be enhanced within the Administration. And it must be done with the resources that are already available to the Administration itself: human, regulatory and financial.

- Increasing the motivational level of public employees will bring an increased dynamism to the change and will improve the chances of success.

- The public sector management systems must be reoriented to stimulate and recognise innovation. An evolution is necessary from the current protective system towards a model where the responsibility and commitment of the public employee acquire prominent roles. And also the results.

- Many public employees have never worked in the private sector. This lack of experience can be inconvenient when projects must be associated with regulations, with development schedules, or with adequate budgets.

- The starting point is an excessively bureaucratic administration model that conditions people management. The objective is to advance towards a management model in which people are talent assets so that they can become the agents of change. A transition is needed from personnel management to talent management, that is articulated through teams.

- The political role must enable leadership of public intra-entrepreneurs. Joining political impulse with internal entrepreneurship and vocation of service will drive change and innovation.

The different phases in the public employee's lifecycle, from selection until departure from the system

The experts emphasised the need to boost training as an important leverage for transformation, to find formulas that will increase motivation, and to incorporate new management systems; for example, performance evaluation, that has a robust history in the private sector. It is important not to forget that public and private ecosystems are different, so the objective is not to mimic experiences that have been successful in other contexts, but to adapt them to the nature of the Administration.

Two other issues that were raised during this part of the debate were the need for an increased professionalisation of public managers, in line with the provisions of the Basic Statute of the Public Employee, and the idea that digital competencies should not only constitute a requisite for professionals to access the Administration, but a key ingredient in continuous training, because nobody can evade the digital transformation: Digital Administration is a part of the Digital Society. This continuous training must be accompanied by experimentation and by putting into practice the new tools and work methodologies in order to consolidate learning and transformation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Talent attraction and retention, motivation, continuous training and management by objectives for civil servants may prove to be the best success guarantees for the transformation plans of the Administration.

- Modify the entry systems to the Administration, implementing models that are more appropriate for the functions that must be performed.

- Find new formulas to evaluate the performance of the public employee that will improve his level of involvement and motivation, and will boost innovation, by implementing incentives programs that go far beyond the purely economical.

- Training planning must be based on the analysis of roles and the competencies associated to each one, and on the creation of ad-hoc capacity building where digital competencies should never be missing. The Administration should avoid training management models that are excessively distributed, and must go for a more global management model.

- Digital competencies should be essential in the public worker's profile, regardless of the position or role. The public employee must be digital.

- Encourage active listening of citizens, by providing public employees with the necessary tools to openly express new proposals that will bring the public service closer to the citizen, and to improve the provided services.

- Review the investment models and understand that the development of transformational projects of great depth require the allocation of budgets that are appropriate given the magnitude of the work involved.

- Go beyond the temporal horizon of the four-year political cycle that forces objectives to be approached in successive approximations, and choose instead a long-term vision that will bring continuity to actions and independence to public management from political cycles. The creation of professional public managers will contribute to this process.

New professional profiles

Before approaching this matter fully, the experts mentioned the professional obsolescence of public employees. In general terms, all of them accepted, as an objective fact, that the mean age of civil servants is high, but they understand that combining the drive and skills of digital natives and of younger professionals with the experience of senior employees results in a positive complementarity, enables the transmission of intergenerational knowledge -including digital competencies- and adds more than it subtracts to the transformational process.

On the other hand, experts have manifested that data constitutes an important component of the digital transformation, although this doesn't mean necessarily that the figure of the Chief Data Officer should be introduced in public organisational charts: what is necessary is that someone takes care of data as a public asset. What has been emphasised the most is the need to reinforce the spirit of public service and the role of innovative workers, which must be identified and stimulated, which does not mean necessarily that this should be achieved through an increase in remunerations.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The ageing of Public Administration personnel is a fact, but associating age to capacity for innovation is a mistake.

- Public Administration is facing the paradox that, on one hand, it has less officials and a decreased capacity to manage internal knowledge, and, on the other hand, it has to tackle the challenges of an advanced society. Thus, resources must be optimised and change must be managed.

- Digital Administration and Digital Society are part of the same context. The public servant is at the same time a citizen, at a time in which society advances at a very fast rate in its own transformational process. The key for the public servant-citizen to accept the digitalisation of their working environment is making these digital competencies also attractive for their private life as a citizen.

- The volume of data that exists in Administrations demands a plan that allows its cataloguing, organisation and analysis to take advantage of the opportunities that are hiding in such vast amounts of information. However, with or without a Chief Data Officer, the Administration must find someone capable of leading change management and combining everyone's effort to launch an Administration that is centred on data.

- Professionals that are capable of catalysing digital transformation are the new profiles that the Public Administration needs in this context of paradigm shift.

- The public sector also needs other specific profiles to place them in strategic and transversal positions. To procure them, it can rely on the private sector, but taking into account the distances that separate both sectors. And always taking into account that knowledge must remain within the public sector.

- The transversal and omnipresent character of digitalisation in the public environment imposes the need to place the responsibility of the process at the higher levels of the organisations.

- Public and private universities should design and offer new degrees that the digital economy requires.

About the Public Sector Observatory (OSPI)

With a focus on the digital transformation of Public Administrations and taking as a reference framework the initiative launched by Informática El Corte Inglés, "Digital Administration 2020", the Public Sector Observatory executes tasks related to the identification, sorting, evaluation and dissemination of public policies, action plans, and successful projects and services for digital transformation, mostly from the international field, from which proposals applicable to the Spanish public sector can be drawn, providing in this way a real knowledge centre of the Digital Administration.

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