

Agile in the public sector





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It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.¹ Gazelles, known for their agility rather than their strength, are able to survive by evading predator attacks. They are born with physical characteristics that enable them to switch rapidly from a rest state to an escaping and evading state when risks and changes are detected and adapt quickly to their new surroundings. Agile organizations share strong similarities with gazelles; they have particular characteristics and attributes that allow them to change or adapt in response to changes in the market and react successfully to the rise of new competitors and disruptive innovations. More recently, organizational agility has reached a new level of importance in the public sector especially in light of the rapid ongoing technological developments that are changing both the corporate and public landscapes in many ways. Will public sector organizations be able to embrace organizational agility?

Key drivers for the rise of agile organizations in the public sector

The rise of agile organizations in the public sector is driven by the need to face, adapt to, and embrace the fast-moving changes that are affecting the sector and how it serves its citizens. Globally, the public sector is undergoing radical digital reforms and transformations as a result of increasing costs and budget pressures, the changing needs of citizens and most importantly, the rise of new technological breakthroughs and disruptions.

Regionally, similar trends apply, more so for countries where less dependence on oil is the target. For example, The UAE ICT 2021 Strategy and UAE National

Innovation Strategy prioritize digital technology as one of the top seven national sectors. In Saudi Arabia, Digital Transformation is a top-four priority in the National Transformation Plan (NTP) 2020.²

Key attributes of agile organizations

Agile organizations have certain attributes that allow them to meet market demands and adjust to trends and ongoing internal and external challenges. They have an embedded culture that focuses on strategic thinking, exploration of innovations and changes, adaptability and proactivity.³ They understand technological advancements, embrace disruption and build on it to provide better solutions to their customers.

In addition, teams in agile organizations are structured differently compared to traditional hierarchical organizations; they are cross-functional, share a strong purpose, commit to each other to deliver, and can deliver end-to-end business value. Cross-functional team members retain their autonomy in their respective area of focus and set their own work pace and supervise their own activities. However, they are expected to collaborate and leverage from each other's skillsets to achieve the desirable outcomes. As a matter of fact, Spotify, one of the world's leading music streaming services that has more than 60 million active users in over 60 countries is an example of companies that "have grown up in the digital age and designed their organizations to be nimble while placing the customer at the center of all product decisions. They accomplish this by unleashing powerful teams of employees that work cross-functionally to achieve clear outcomes."⁴

Moreover, those teams have distinct communication rules. Rather than setting rigid communication processes and policies, they promote communication channels that drive knowledge-sharing, teamwork and radical transparency. These channels enable the fast and efficient flow of information and help the organization adapt to changes and constantly improve. Social media, for instance, is now, more than ever, being used as a main tool to facilitate fast and prompt communication among teams. By simply creating a WhatsApp group, messages reach team members anytime, anywhere around the world. The speed at which messages can be conveyed allows for fast action and reduced turnaround times in addressing potential issues.

To also achieve agility, the decision-making authority shall be not centralized in one individual; it shall be distributed across the different laterals and verticals in the organization. Leaders are not involved in the day-to-day operations, they are strategy- and vision-focused and customer-centric. They emphasize the need to broaden their professional network and leverage it to deliver value-added outcomes to their customers. Their involvement in the day-to-day business is mainly limited to enabling teams to succeed by coaching, guiding and mentoring team members rather than controlling and directing them. "Effective leaders in this new model should be able to think beyond individual functions; operate without command and control behavior; create diversity; stimulate collaboration; while coaching employees and enabling teams to succeed."⁴

Acquiring attributes of agile organizations will most likely enable the public sector to adapt to changing dynamics and offer value-added services to their citizens. Adjusting rapidly to citizens' demands, providing solutions to their different concerns and shaping public needs in the long run are all priorities for public entities.

How can the public sector acquire agile attributes?

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The technological landscape

As digital transformation initiatives are being implemented as part of national visions to enhance citizens' journey, governments have started embedding technologies in their operational landscape. It is predicted that the active base of fingerprint reader-equipped devices will top one billion in 2018, and that the number of countries using biometrics in national identity schemes

will grow.⁵ In fact, estimates show that from 2016 to 2021, 3.2 billion chip-based National e-IDs will be issued by 103 countries while 485 million National ID cards that integrate biometrics into non-chip based card programs will be delivered by 33 countries.⁶ The largest scheme so far is in India, which has collected facial, fingerprint and iris data for one billion registrants. Such technology could be used as an additional way of accessing services such as tax payments, medical records or even e-voting on mobiles.⁵

Indoor digital navigation will become significantly more commonplace over the next five years. Satellite navigations systems have revolutionized how people find places. Being able to use a smartphone to navigate buildings could be particularly useful to the public sector.⁵ Patients, visitors and staff 

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could move more effectively around sprawling facilities like hospitals. Employees in major public sector offices could save time finding free desks, meeting rooms or each other. And the emergency services could quickly pinpoint individuals in need of help.

Public sector organizations in the GCC have started to build on technological advancement and innovation; digital transformation initiatives are already in place but fast-developing technologies such as biometrics, indoor navigation or even self-driving cars could have particularly profound consequences for the citizens they serve. Governments would eventually face the inevitable need to rapidly and efficiently integrate technological innovations into the core of their operations to have better visibility on their citizens’ needs and to ensure a response aligned with changing market dynamics.

In surveys and interviews conducted by Deloitte with government leaders and officials across several countries, 75 percent of the respondents considered that digital technologies are disrupting the public sector.⁷ Public sector organizations are put in a position where embracing technological advancement is a must to be able to respond to citizens’ needs. In leveraging agile organizations’ attributes in general and understanding technological advancement in particular, public sector organizations will be able to capitalize and build on technology and innovation to better respond to citizens’ demands related to quality, diversification, ease and speed of services.

The structural landscape

Having permanent cross-functional teams in a public sector organization can be challenging given the nature of the industry. However, transient cross-functional teams can be formed in these types of organizations and utilized via tactical interventions aimed at ultimately serving stakeholders’ needs. Based on the particularities of each initiative, temporary cross-functional teams can be formed from employees assuming parallel responsibilities: one related to the initiative in play and the second related to the individual’s original day-to-day job.

Nevertheless, establishing such cross-functional capabilities could be deemed complex given the nature of public sector organizations. Similar restructuring initiatives could be perceived as farfetched, especially at the core of the operation. Flexible design, however, could be introduced and incubated on the “edges” of the organization most threatened by disruption, while protecting the stable and successful “core”. Efforts to redesign organizations would be protective of the core while allowing the organization to tackle new initiatives and innovative ideas on its edge.⁴

As mentioned earlier, a key attribute of agile organizations is cross-functional teams. In forming transient cross-functional teams and adopting a flexible design at the “edges,” public sector organizations will exhibit, to a certain extent, agile organizational traits. In leveraging those attributes, public sector organizations will be better positioned to respond faster to citizens’ changing

needs. They will ensure an efficient flow of information and a faster decision-making process, as well as promote quality services and tailored solutions to meet citizens' needs and expectations.

The cultural landscape

Changes in the national cultural landscape are also rapidly reflecting on the internal cultures of organizations. Leaders need to consider modernizing their approach to managing the day-to-day business. According to United Nations statistics in 2017, 43 percent of the GCC population is currently under the age of 30.⁸ Moreover, particularly in Saudi Arabia, women are becoming increasingly involved, heavily encouraged and expected to participate in the workforce. These dynamics will inevitably drive public sector leaders to modernize, embrace changes and deploy appropriate talent solutions, not only to maintain a motivated workforce internally but also to address their citizens' needs. Leadership training programs, workforce planning and succession management are potential solutions for answering these changes. Leveraging talent solutions would contribute to shaping a workforce of public servants ready to embrace the changing cultural dynamics; a workforce that has the ability to rapidly understand citizens' changing needs and utilize proper technological advancements to better serve them.

Conclusion

Successful and valued public sector organizations are the ones that possess attributes and characteristics that enable them to respond rapidly and defiantly to the ever-changing needs of citizens and adapt to the constantly evolving socioeconomic environment. To be

perceived as completely agile might be unrealistic for public sector organizations given the internal and external factors that come into play, but by adopting some agile traits, these organizations could view changes as opportunities, not as pitfalls. In the private sector, some companies are able to capitalize on innovation, improve their performance and record major successes. Toyota, Apple, General Electric, Home Depot, Google, Whole Foods, Starbucks, FedEx, Netflix, and Ritz Carlton are all leading companies in their respective industries.³ They all exhibit common traits that are attributes of the agile organization. Leveraging agile characteristics already acquired in the private sector and even exploring public-private partnerships opportunities, would pave the way for enhanced focus on "public customer" or citizen experience by responding faster to changing needs and providing improved and tailored solutions. John Chambers, former Cisco CEO once said: "Without exception, all of my biggest mistakes occurred because I

moved too slowly."³ Will the public sector adopt organization agility to cope with the fast-moving pace achieved by privately owned businesses? ●

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Endnotes

1. Leon C. Megginson, Professor of Management and Marketing at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge (in a 1963 speech on Charles Darwin's 'The Origin of Species')
2. Deloitte National Transformation in the Middle East A Digital Journey
3. Abe Harraf, Professor University of Northern Colorado Kaylynn Tate, Research Assistant University of Northern Colorado, Attributes of Agile Organizations
4. Deloitte POV, Unlocking the flexible organization, 2016
5. Deloitte Tech predictions 2017 for the public sector
6. The Global National eID Industry Report, 2017
7. Deloitte Insights, The journey to government's digital transformation, 2015
8. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, United Nations, World Population Prospects, June 2017

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