



Book Review

Digital Transformation at Scale: Why Strategy is the Delivery. London Publishing Partnership, (2018)

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Across the globe, the traditional practices of public administration are faced with the challenge of adapting to an increasingly digital society. This is not a new problem. The state has steadily lagged behind leading practices in technological adoption for decades but with the increasing pace of technological innovation and adoption elsewhere, government risks falling steadily further behind. With public health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic forcing the public administration to adopt digital practices in the absence of the analog and in-person work-arounds that have long substituted for meaningful digital adaptation, in 2020, chickens have come home to roost.

All is not lost. Prescient public service leaders the world over have sought to tackle this problem and a great deal of meaningful progress has been made, albeit, little of it has been at the scale of the entire public administration. Enter *Digital Transformation at Scale: Why Strategy is the Delivery*. Written by four of the thinkers/practitioners at the heart of the UK's Government Digital Service, one of the first and most notoriously successful blended teams of technologists and policy wonks, the book offers insights into successful digital transformation of the public administration, including both practical and more abstract.

The book is rich with insights for digital transformation teams, public sector leaders and academics alike. It offers thoughtful commentary on a range of subjects that are key to successful digital transformation teams, from selection practices for government CIOs, to team composition, to demonstrating success and the relationships that digital transformation teams should have with organizational strategic plans. In some ways, it reads like a how-to manual for digital transformation guerrillas rebelling against the arcane order of analog governance, determined to stay the course to unrecoverable oblivion.

In doing so, *Digital Transformation at Scale* also offers a de facto manifesto for digital change, highlighting the obstacles that are deeply embedded in the current practices of public administration and how to overcome them. While age-old practices, such as the emphasis on continuity and uniformity in process and outcome, once served the state well, they now hinder the public administration's development into an effective and modern institution capable of grappling with the challenges of the 21st century.

In one such example of many, the authors paint a compelling portrait of the public administration's tendency to crowd in around transformation units, heaping on existing bureaucratic procedures, authorization requirements and tangential (if not wholly unrelated) taskings which risk submerging the transformation mission entirely. This descriptor is all too familiar to those with direct experience in digital transformation. To its credit, the book is not tempted by the low hanging fruit of haphazardly criticizing the nature of public administration itself, instead recognizing that this tendency is an adaptive part of effective governance, albeit one that is ill-suited to the challenge at hand.

To address this, it urges restraint on the part of digital transformation teams, starting small, aiming for less and tempering the desire to "fix everything" with a focused mission. With a colourful analogy, it warns against digital transformation teams behaving like the drunkard who enters a bar and picks a fight with the entire clientele. A government department, like any large organization, is filled with vested interests who might view digital transformation teams as a threat, or as a prospective armchair critic of their past work. Instead, it suggests that alliance-building, collaboration and cooperation should be the order of the day, not the rigid pursuit of ideal-types. To that end, digital transformation teams succeed when they stay under the radar, generously share credit for successes and employ the utmost tact in strategic communications.

It also highlights the important yet understudied dynamic that exists between traditional policy professionals and technologists, an increasingly prevalent feature of public administration. It avoids succumbing to the well-worn specialist-generalist dichotomy, instead describing policy professionals as highly mobile polymaths who hold the rare and crucial skills of being able to navigate complex structures, secure resources and win approval. Technologists by contrast are builders and product owners, understanding the intricacies of application, development and continuous renewal on which all digital transformation rests. It is far from a foregone conclusion that the two groups will fit naturally with one another, but it is an indisputable prerequisite for any meaningful success, as is these groups' ability to meaningfully cross pollinate and learn from one another.

On the whole, *Digital Transformation at Scale* is an enjoyable and insightful read on several levels. It offers a historical account of the UK Government Digital Service, a de facto prototype for transformation units the world over, including the Canadian Digital Service in Ottawa. It sheds light on the conflicts at the heart of public administration's adjustment to the digital age, an area which increasingly pre-occupies the time and energies of the public service. And finally, it provides a playbook for those who find themselves at the heart of these issues, making it essential reading for those who seek to join a digital transformation team or otherwise be a part of the next phase of public service modernization.

If there is one single shortcoming of the work, it is a bait and switch in the title about the issue of scalability. Indeed, there are many valuable keys to success throughout the work, including how to sustain (and ideally to grow) digital transformation and make their impact across government, but aside from the idea that success begets success, it offers much less insight on true scalability across the public administration. As Kent Aitkin rightly pointed out in

the white paper *Governance in the Digital Age*, the continued existence of transformation units is tenuous and often dependent on high-level policy cover or executive champions whose continued support cannot be taken for granted over the long term.

This dependence on the good intentions of high-level leadership is an alarming vulnerability for ongoing efforts at public service renewal. Indeed, at the time of writing in 2020, the Canadian Digital Service, a direct equivalent to the Government Digital Service at the heart of the book, remains on a short leash with its funding set to expire in 2022. Scaling digital transformation will not be assured by the continued success of entities like CDS; indeed, successful programs get cancelled too. Digital transformation that is truly at scale will be unstoppable but unfortunately, this remains an aspiration rather than a foregone conclusion.

While the book leaves something to be desired when it comes to predictions about the future trajectory of digital government and other elements of commentary on the overarching trend of digital transformation, this is not the book's principal focus. By consolation, it offers plenty to whet the appetite for those looking to explore how government might look at the end of a digital transformation. Overall, it is a very worthy book that has something to offer for all types of prospective readers.