



Digital transformation of Austria's public services

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Austria moves toward government as a service

The pandemic highlighted the need for fast and wide-ranging reforms in the digital provision of public services worldwide. In Austria, the focus is on changing the civil service culture and opening up access to the skills and data needed to provide better services to citizens in a more timely manner.

Since 2003, the Austrian government has repeatedly presented digital action plans, which have also contained a strategic framework for the digitization of services. The aim is to allow government and regional bodies to provide better services and save time and money in the process.

On the service provision side, there is a looming deadline. Austria needs to automate its public services ahead of a major demographic shift. By 2030, a large proportion of civil servants will be retired. Just a decade later, by 2040, nearly half the population will be aged 65 or over. This means that it will not be possible either physically or financially for the jobs they do to be done by real people. Essentially, the digital action plan paves the way for smart automation (AI), or "government as a service" as Christian Rupp, former Federal Executive Secretary, eGovernment Austria, points out.

At the same time, the global pandemic highlighted and accelerated the need for a vast shift towards digitization on the user side, both for individuals and companies. Around the world, local and national governments worked hard to make service provision safe in a world of COVID-19. They also dealt with many new demands placed upon them by anxious and remotely located citizens and organizations. In Romania, the Ministry of Labor introduced robots that are processing 96 percent of claims for self-employed payments, cutting the time each took from 20 minutes to 36 seconds. In the United States, state authorities in California scaled capacity for civil servants to work from home by turning to the cloud.

Austria, in common with many nations, has some way to go. With the establishment of a Federal Ministry for Digital and Economic Affairs to promote eGovernment among the population and support SMEs, the country is among the top 5 EU countries in the EU eGovernment benchmark 2021 and 10th in the European Commission's Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2021. But it is lagging seemingly more innovative countries such as Luxembourg and Denmark. So what is holding Austria back and what can be done to improve its position?

According to Rupp, who led the federal government's digital programs in Austria for 15 years, the number one challenge is getting the culture right. "The public administrative sector's culture has been the same since the days of Archduchess Maria Theresa in the 18th century. She reformed public administration and what she created stayed virtually untouched until 2003, when Austria made a digital file system mandatory in the federal administration," he says.

Since then, there has been progress, with digitization adopted across a wider landscape, from legal information systems (RIS) to citizen's portal and health records and, in January 2021, an online tax filing service. However, many public services are still offered only Monday to Friday during office hours or as a printable pdf form, especially at the municipality level.

"We need a culture of 100 percent online services 24 hours a day. This means provision for digital applications or inquiries through to internal processing, approval, and payment," says Rupp. He emphasizes also, that "at the same time, there needs to be secure system access for civil servants working from home and the ability for big data analytics and data sharing across different administrations".

Rupp points to greater use of public-private partnerships as a way forward and more services such as DigitalService4Germany, which helps develop services for public administrators. Indeed, Austria successfully launched a number of services developed jointly with the private sector, e.g. Smart City Vienna, for reforms to town planning and GovLabAustria. But more effort is required.

“Hackathons can develop better services quicker and in a more agile way. The government also needs to use think tanks and scrum masters or product owners. It’s not the normal language of the civil service, but it is what’s required,” he says.

Another challenge is skills, from working with technology in a secure way to reviewing and updating capabilities as required. “Technology is moving at pace and so is the regulation surrounding it. What people learn in school is quickly superseded. When today’s administrators were being trained, we didn’t have blockchain or the cloud,” he says.

The UK is an example of a country that has [recognized this skills shift](#). In 2020, it announced plans to train 500 public sector analysts in data science before the end of the year. Elsewhere, the Abu Dhabi government [is beefing up its digital training](#) while in Africa the World Economic Forum [partnered with Africa’s Digital Skills for Public Services Employees](#) to train staff in critical recovery.

A separate issue is the way the public sector conceives of customer journeys and which services it digitizes. “The civil service simply isn’t used to thinking in terms of happy customers. But that’s what it needs to do,” Rupp says. To this end, he recommends services are developed right from the start jointly with users to better take into account not just their needs, but their experience (e.g. [DigiLabs in Germany](#)). “They also need to elicit and respond to feedback for running services,” he recommends.

Things to keep in mind include asking whether a chat bot would help someone filling in their tax return or other official documents, for example, and whether the service can use open data to automatically complete a form based on a given identification number or name and address.

Rupp points to Scandinavia, where tax returns for employed people are made automatically by the Ministry of Finance. The system knows where you’re employed, your salary, how many children you have, and any other allowances you qualify for. “Making it easy makes it fast and efficient. It saves time and money. This [system](#) has also been adopted by Austria,” he says.

The Scandinavian example is made possible thanks to open data—something more governments are pursuing as part of their response to the global pandemic to make public services COVID-19 safe. In Austria, Rupp says 1,300 public institutions are making [open data](#) available to develop better services, and this has already resulted in over 600 applications. These range from a service that helps residents find free car parking spaces on the street to locating the nearest public toilets.

Administrations from Australia and Singapore to the UK and Canada have found how effective open data can be, as experts describe in two videos from AWS Institute Transformation Essentials for Public Service Leaders: [Use What Works](#) and [Be Open to Change](#).

“The beauty of open data is that it can be used by third parties to build apps that the public can then use. The public gets what it needs and the state saves time and money,” Rupp says.

More apps also lead to greater interoperability, which is important, because it allows people to move from one region or even country to another and still be able to access digital services. For example, in the near future, an Austrian on holiday or working in Poland will be able to have a digital wallet with their ID, driving license, and health records. With interoperable public services, foreign authorities can access the right information as required, assuming there is provision for secure cloud computing.

Austria has undoubtedly laid some solid foundations. “eGovernment is a journey, not a destination,” Rupp says. “It’s about culture, skills, and working together with users. And COVID-19 accelerated the whole process. Now, the challenge will be to harness that desire and need for change to maintain momentum.”

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