

# 'Getting the basics right' in times of digital transformation

'Have you got the basics in order yet?'

**This question often pops up when discussing government automation. It places our focus on getting the fundamentals right, having things well arranged, tidy and neat, and ensuring that all problems are solved. As a result of this focus, many organisations run projects that have the aim -and often the explicit title- of 'Getting the Basics Right'. Essentially, this is their way of putting a long-term effort into structuring current practice and, specifically, what *isn't* working.**

This is understandable, human beings have an intrinsic desire to organise. And besides, it's a good feeling to know that things are in order. That's why if someone asks 'Shall we put everything in order?', only a few would have the courage to answer: 'No – let's keep it messy!'

## **Government is about quality and solidity**

The urge to organise is reinforced by a number of characteristics of government organisations. In the first place, they aim for stability and predictability. The government must be stable and reliable and deliver predictable services. Citizens do not demand *fashionable* services. Government is about quality and solidity. Nobody would prefer a passport with a fantastic new look and feel that doesn't provide any tangible security.

The fact that the government generally constitutes a bureaucracy also leads to predictability, transparency and solidity being prioritised over creativity. Looking at it this way, there are several reasons for wanting to put the basics in order.

## **Is there a downside to put the basics in order?**

Well, firstly, let's look at the success rate of such projects. How many of them have been completed according to a set schedule? Was everything on time or were there always additional tasks? And what about the lead time: was it months or years? Many long-term projects suffer from unexpected additional workload and are rarely completed by their initial deadlines. Perform this test yourself: ask the manager of a run-of-the-mill project how it's going. There's a good chance that they will reply with a disgruntled 'not so good; there are more and more things to do!'.

Secondly and to me this seems like the most important point, putting the emphasis on getting the basics right can lead us to neglect the issue of innovation. This can occur despite innovation being an important source of problem-solving. In my opinion, long-term problems can be solved with innovation, although short-term solutions frequently become the focus. This is often backward-looking, as we solve what went wrong in the past but fail to look forward.

Focusing on the past means less time for the future. A certain human bias also plays a role here: the future consists of uncertainties, and we don't always think that's a good thing. Indeed, if we look at the staff of many government organisations, we can be reasonably certain that there are fewer thrill seekers than at a start-up. There's nothing wrong with that. It's understandable and, in fact, a very good thing that companies attract different profiles, namely those that best suit the task that particular organisations have to perform.

## **So what's the right approach?**

It may be beneficial to put less emphasis on whether 'the basics are in order' and more on innovation. Here's an idea: turn things around. Instead of spending 80% of your time on what already exists and 20% on innovation, do the

opposite. Of course, operations must continue to run, and you shouldn't forget what's already in place, but do so while spending 80% of the time dealing with innovation and 20% on what already exists.

It seems likely that this setup will result in more solutions that, crucially, will solve a large number of existing problems anyway. Looking to the future doesn't mean abandoning the present, but it can yield creative approaches to current obstacles. This principle certainly applies to IT, where new products, services and opportunities regularly emerge. It goes without saying that

processing power has changed the world, to mention just one example of innovation. Digital transformation follows the same pattern: it doesn't occur by putting the basics in order but by focusing on innovation.

So, when you hear the question *'Have you got the basics in order yet?'*, your answer should be: 'No, and we won't. We'll make sure we get really innovative and start tackling current challenges that way'. This requires a different mentality, but it's worth a try.

*The views expressed in this blog are those of the authors and not necessarily those of EIPA.*