

Back To The Future

Solving the Urgent Digital Skills Gap in Public Sector

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LEAP

Introduction

As the UK general elections approach, many predict a different party will take the reins. This signals potential changes. The next wave of public sector digital transformation seems inevitable. The current government's remarkable progress is evident in the projection that the digital profession will grow by 6 percent. This growth highlights that digital advancement is essential for any incoming government to succeed. The Government Digital Service (GDS) and the Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO) deserve praise for their significant progress in advancing the digital profession. They have excelled particularly through their service standards, capability model, pay framework, digital excellence programs, and apprenticeship initiatives.

As we celebrate these achievements, it is essential to reflect on a critical question:

How do we reconcile the growth of the DDaT profession with the needs of the remaining 94 per cent of the Civil Service workforce?

Most of the workforce is currently supported through siloed lenses specific to their professions and capability frameworks. This dichotomy highlights a fundamental challenge. We need to change the current development approach to a multi-disciplinary operating model to accelerate progress and deliver at scale.

Closing the Gap

Just as the pool of typists of yesteryear became obsolete with the advent of personal computers and typing skills becoming a basic requirement for everyone, the Civil Service must similarly evolve in its approach to digital competencies. The success of the Civil Service's digital transformation hinges on a holistic approach that integrates digital skills across all professions. This ensures that digital literacy is embedded within all roles, just as basic typing skills are today.

Imagine if only 6 percent of today's workforce knew how to type while the remaining 94 percent relied on that small group to handle all typing tasks. Progress would be inherently limited. Similarly, without widespread digital competency, the progress of the digitally skilled 6 percent is restricted. It's not about everyone becoming a data scientist or a UX designer, but rather about empowering more digitally proficient civil servants who exhibit the following:

- **Digital Literacy for All:** Just as everyone today can type, civil servants should have an understanding of the potential of emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT) and data analytics, while ensuring their knowledge stays up to date.
- **Awareness of Capabilities:** They should understand what these digital disciplines can achieve, including concepts like prototyping, Human Centred Design (HCD), and the importance of 'failing fast and better'.
- **Confidence to Call on Experts:** Much like knowing when to seek advanced help, civil servants should be confident in identifying when and which experts to call upon.
- **Timely Engagement:** Crucially, they should know to engage these experts early in the process to avoid systemic roadblocks and ensure smoother transitions.

Without this integration, the different disciplines will continue to clash, hindering transformational change. Diverse principles, subcultures, objectives, and viewpoints across professions create systemic roadblocks that hinder progress and make change more challenging.

Potential Solutions

A different approach to levelling up skills across the board is essential. This is the rationale behind the creation of LEAP, which adopts a transformational lens while focusing on digital skills. By convening and levelling multi-disciplinary teams, we place them at the forefront of delivery, ensuring that digital transformation is not just about digital skills but about integrating these skills within the broader context of public service delivery.

Former Minister for the Cabinet Office, Jeremy Quin, highlighted this necessity in his November 2023 speech, stating, "The skills we need to deliver modern government services are changing, and growing digital capability in Government continues to be a key priority." This context prompts several thought-provoking questions:

How can we better integrate digital skills across all professions within the public sector?

What measures can be taken to break down the silos that exist between different capability professions?

How can we enable a culture of collaboration and mutual understanding among these diverse groups?



Transforming a Public-Sector Organisation with LEAP:

The Challenge

A public sector organisation faced a significant challenge: transforming its operating model to become more citizen-centric, outward-facing, and digitally savvy. The business case proposed an investment of £35 million over five years. However, leadership was hesitant. Despite recognising the need for improvement, they struggled to grasp digital concepts and were weary from years of unsuccessful business transformations.

A senior leader expressed the prevalent concerns: "I am worried about being left behind. I'm worried: 'Am I going to be able to get my head around this? Is this going to replace my job?' It's a fear of change. In our organisation, things have been done the same way for so long that change just seems like it's going to bring problems."

The Solution

The organisation engaged LEAP to help activate leadership and drive the initiative forward. LEAP's approach was different from traditional training or learning programs, which could incite resistance—a psychological phenomenon where people instinctively reject what is imposed upon them. Instead, LEAP provided a suite of tools, including Activity Cards, dynamic Workshops, and Master Classes, designed to spark curiosity and facilitate natural learning.

LEAP's strategy aimed to empower leaders and staff with the knowledge and processes needed to enhance their capabilities, decision-making skills, and career prospects. This approach tapped into the organisation's natural curiosity, significantly increasing the chances of adoption and success.

Implementation

Learning Workstream: A dedicated learning workstream was established within the transformation programme. This workstream developed and customised learning to meet the specific needs of the individuals and disciplines, ensuring the learning was relevant objectives and desired outcomes of the programme.

Workshops and Master Classes: These sessions offered hands-on learning opportunities, promoting peer-to-peer engagement and practical skill development. They helped demystify digital concepts and demonstrated the practical application of new skills in a safe and supportive environment.

Interactive Learning Environment: LEAP's digital platform integrated formal, informal, and self-directed learning models to create an engaging and interactive environment. The platform included a comprehensive digital content repository, real-time reporting, and remote access capabilities.



Transforming a Public-Sector Organisation with LEAP:

The Impact

The project gets off to a quicker start than previous initiatives due to the comprehensive buy-in from the entire organisation. Everyone understood the problems, the benefits, and crucially, how to achieve the desired outcomes.

Enhanced Understanding and Buy-In:

Through practical and hands-on learning, staff and leadership gained a clear perspective on the challenges and opportunities of the new operating model.

Knowledge Base Development: The organisation created a repository of tools, methods, and techniques that could be applied to future initiatives, reducing the cost and reliance on external expertise for future changes.

Risk Reduction: By facilitating an understanding of change and developing internal skills, LEAP significantly reduced the risk of project failure.

Self-Sufficiency and Cost Savings: The organisation became more self-sufficient in delivering transformation, leading to substantial cost savings and less reliance on external contractors.

Sustainable Improvements: LEAP equipped the organisation to deliver through its own people, ensuring sustainable and scalable improvements. Skills were levelled up across various disciplines, promoting harmony and effective collaboration within teams and functions.

Results

The project delivers successfully, on time, and within budget. More importantly, the organisation emerged more agile and became a central part of the public discourse in an era where digital engagement with citizens is paramount. The organisation is now digital from the edge to the back office, ready to meet the demands of the 21st century with confidence and capability.

Through LEAP, this public sector organisation transformed its operations and culture, demonstrating that with the right approach, even the most change-fatigued environments can embrace and thrive in a digital future.



Conclusion

Closing the digital skills gap is imperative for transforming the Civil Service. Embedding digital literacy at all levels empowers civil servants to leverage emerging technologies and enhance collaboration.

A multi-disciplinary approach is essential for aligning individual capabilities with common digital goals. LEAP exemplifies this strategy by breaking down silos and enabling a culture of continuous learning and innovation.

To drive meaningful and sustainable digital transformation, it is crucial to integrate learning into the core of digital initiatives. Governance, incentives, and metrics must be designed to encourage continuous learning and innovation across organisations.

Addressing systemic barriers and embedding digital skills into daily operations will ensure that the Civil Service can adapt to evolving challenges. A more confident and digitally proficient workforce will be well-positioned to deliver exceptional public services efficiently and effectively, meeting the demands of tomorrow's government..

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to digitally succeed.**

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