A view of digital transformation in SA's public sector

By Murshid Obaray   24 Jan 2022

South Africa's private sector is abuzz with digital transformation. But what about our public sector? Is our government as committed to technological progress as we need them to be? It might surprise you to hear that the answer is yes and no. But in order to grasp that cryptic on-the-fence answer, you first need to understand that we cannot look at the public sector through a private sector lens.

Source: www.pexels.com

The public sector, for all its critical importance, and all its apparent failures, is a unique blend of stakeholders, suppliers, financiers and citizens that make up everyone with a South African ID number as well as foreign nationals who come to work and play in our beautiful country. There are successes, but we all know that it can do a lot better.

In this age of catalysed digitalisation, what is it that is holding our public sector from blossoming into a more efficient, accountable, and transparent e-government? Well, it begins with the most common governmental gripes.

Agility vs. corruption

In our public departments, institutions and enterprises, there are people, especially in IT and senior management, that have all the ambition and passion in the world to deliver the best service to the citizens that depend on them. Their problem is that they are inevitably constrained by a supply chain management bogged down by a litany of rules and regulations that are seemingly immovable yet utterly essential.

This is the core of our public sector's stymied digital transformation. It desperately needs to improve on time to decision.

For example, if a government department publishes a tender, that could take anywhere between three and 18 months to be awarded. This generally comes down to the various hoops that need to be cleared, but we need to juxtapose that with the threat of corruption that these hoops are in place to mitigate.

What we need to get government to do, is to make those hoops stringent but ensure that the decision-making process is more efficient. This would go a long way to bringing smaller IT businesses into the fold as they won't have to spend millions on bidding for tenders and then waiting for months on end for the process to conclude.

Many of the checks and balances in place are designed to prevent corruption and fraud. When it comes to the public sector, we always need to remember that every system needs added protection from corruption. This is one of the key differentiators between public and private digital transformation.

There is technology available to manage and improve these processes. Automation and digitisation of many of the tender processes can make the system much more efficient and thereby reduce the time to decide as well as combat potential corrupt activities. This, in turn, helps all organisations bidding for government work, especially the SMMEs who often rely on government work to keep afloat.

Why private and public sectors are apples and oranges

There is a much larger onus on government to be strict in its operations as it works with public money. There absolutely should be stricter control mechanisms over how that money is spent. More controls means the system is slower and less agile and that's the way it has always been. Things can be improved on with the correct use of technology.

The private sector has shareholders who mandate a business to get things done quickly. Government is mandated to get things right.

In the same breath, time is money in the private sector but government doesn't stand to lose as much by simply waiting longer. There is no financial incentive for the public sector to streamline except that improved efficiency means greater service delivery, which in turn, means more stimulation for the fiscus. So perhaps, a private sector perspective would help, but let's not pretend that they are the same. Private sector solutions do not necessarily equal public sector excellence.

Always on the edge of tomorrow, private sector innovations should lead the way for public implementation. Technologically speaking, there is no better example of this than the Internet of Things or IoT.

An integrated Internet of People

IoT is currently toted as the revolutionary technology of the day. By harnessing the power data through devices, businesses are able to understand and predict every movement to enhance efficiencies like never before. With more data comes more intelligence.

Imagine every citizen had an app where they could report a pothole, a power fault, a water cut, the birth of their child and the renewal of their driving license all in one place. All data points in a complicated machine of operations.

To gather all these points of data, we need an integration platform that all government departments can use and link them all together.

There is a government integration platform in place at SITA which is available to all of government, but it is not yet in full use. As it stands, everything happens in siloes so we need to figure out how to break those siloes down. We do that by putting platforms in place that everyone can use so we can create an integrated way of working that will bring about efficiencies.

The integration platform at SITA allows for just that. What is now necessary is to link a business process and an IoT platform to that integration platform to create a truly connected system.

If we take the concept of the Internet of Things and tap into the Internet of People, perhaps we can gather all the data we need to overcome some of our most urgent challenges.

South Africa is not an island

Working for global technology companies has afforded me the opportunity to travel all over the world. The issues that we experience in South Africa are ones that are found all over the world, even in more developed nations.

There are areas in the United States, the world's beacon of progress, that are behind South Africa. There are areas in China and Europe that are behind us, too. There are also areas in Africa that are ahead of us. We don't need to stand back for anyone. All the major technology companies have a strong presence in South Africa so we have all the right technology at our disposal. We just need the will (and the funding) to bring it all together. Perhaps the answer lies with a little PPP – i.e. Public-Private Perspective.

*Note that Bizcommunity does not necessarily share the views of its contributors - the opinions and statements expressed herein are solely those of the author.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Murshid Obaray is key account director at Software AG

For more, visit: https://www.bizcommunity.com