



Issues in digital government*

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the trend of digitalization and flexible work in the public sector and has opened up possibilities for new work modalities, with the use of information and communication technologies, and new types of contracts. New ways of working have also exposed inequalities and digital divides across the public sector workforce. Equal opportunities should be given for the provision of digital capacity with special attention given to public sector workers in low-income and conflicted countries and in rural and remote areas where digital gaps are most pronounced. While governments can benefit greatly from digitalized services and a strong online presence, misinformation and fake news will have to be combatted to retrain trust in government.

Recommendations

The Committee recommends that the Council encourage governments to develop appropriate schemes for managing flexible work and contract work in the public sector, review public sector labour laws to reflect flexible work arrangements, develop protocols and guidelines for performance assessment in flexible work regimes, and accelerate efforts to enhance digital skills in the context of

public sector workforce planning at both the national and subnational levels. (Paragraph 12)

► See [ECOSOC resolution 2021/12](#)

* Excerpt from Committee of Experts on Public Administration, Report on the twentieth session. See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2021, Supplement No. 24 ([E/2021/44-E/C.16/2021/7](#))

Discussion

Emergence of new work modalities

A further lesson drawn from the COVID-19 pandemic is the need to broaden the scope of public sector labour relations and consider the changing nature of work, for example towards more flexible work arrangements and enhanced use of information and communication technologies, which could be observed in both the public and private sectors. The advent of alternate working arrangements continues to shed light on digital divides in the public sector. The Committee notes that public sector workers do not always have access to adequate equipment and infrastructure to perform their functions effectively. This raises a practical question as to whether expenses related to equipment, utilities and office space borne by public sector workers under new work arrangements should be compensated and, if so, under what conditions. Particular attention could be paid to public sector workers in low-income and conflicted countries and in rural and remote areas where digital gaps are most pronounced.

Differences in digital competencies are observed across hierarchical levels, for example in situations where higher-ranking officials rely on technical

support from more junior staff. Given that an information and communications technology - enabled public administration is part of the foundation of sustainable development, digital literacy could be a helpful criterion in the recruitment of public sector workers while ensuring substantive equality of opportunity for all. Special attention could be paid to the local level, where the workforce as a whole often lags behind the national Government in terms of digital literacy.

The Committee reiterates that Governments could benefit greatly from digitalized services and a strong online presence, acting in a timely fashion and expanding coverage of public services to all groups and geographic areas in the recovery from the pandemic. Advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence and big data, with adequate regulatory, administrative and security safeguards and the capacity to manage and analyse information could help Governments improve their understanding of people's needs. Many Governments could accelerate efforts to strengthen the requisite information and communication technology capabilities in the public sector workforce.

Role of media and fake news

The Committee underscores that information is an area in which Governments could play an important role. Clear, verified information backed up by evidence is the key to overcoming challenges related to fake news and mistrust of government. Fake news undermine trust in the State and institutions, notably in areas where access to the Internet is

limited and there are few opportunities to consider alternative sources of information. Three crucial factors could be considered in building trust: effectiveness in the delivery of accurate information, inclusiveness and engagement of all stakeholders; and accountability that ensured transparency and integrity.

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