

How to remake government for the digital age

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*A recent report by **Sarah Fink** and colleagues at Policy Exchange outlines how the power of technology, data and the internet can be harnessed to truly transform the way government operates and delivers public services. In this article, she summarises a series of recommendations made in the report around efficiency gains and digitising Whitehall, developing a total data approach to policymaking, and changing culture and attitudes in government.*



Ten years ago, Facebook didn't exist, but now the social network has over one billion users across the world. Twenty years ago Google didn't exist, but now there are now nearly 13 billion searches carried out per month. Thirty years ago, there was no internet. Now the internet, search engines, and social networks have changed many aspects of our economy and society almost beyond recognition. Despite all of this, has the digital revolution been felt less anywhere than government?

In our recent report "[Smaller, Better, Faster, Stronger : Remaking government for the digital age](#)" we outline how the power of technology, data and the internet can be harnessed to truly transform the way government operates and delivers public services. Government has made quite a bit of progress in this space, and if current plans for transformation are successful, then by 2015 the digital government landscape should include some impressive progress. But arguably, we still have an analogue government living in a digital world.

Over the course of our research we conducted a number of expert interviews, held roundtable discussions and various panel events about how technology can transform government, how to make better use of data, and the leadership challenges associated with these developments. We submitted requests under the Freedom of Information Act to 38 government departments and agencies for information about their ICT budgets, contracts, devices and internet use, and engaged YouGov to survey around two thousand individuals working in the UK public sector in order to explore their attitudes to technology and organisational effectiveness.

In light of our research findings and the current landscape, we made a series of recommendations around efficiency gains and digitising Whitehall, developing a total data approach to policymaking, and changing culture and attitudes in government. The following touches on a few of these recommendations.

Digitising Whitehall

The Crown Prosecution Service prints one million sheets of paper a day. Two articulated trucks loaded with paperwork pull into the DVLA every day. Even if you complete a passport application form online, the Passport Office will print the form out and post it back to you to sign and send back.

Pushing paper around the country is slow and expensive. Government should eliminate paper for interactions within and between departments, and switch exclusively to digital channels for public services that do not need a face-to-face interaction with the public. Digitisation should be seen as a way to strengthen the human element of interactions with government, clearing away inefficient activities so that staff can focus on intensive face-to-face contact and support where it is needed most. [Previous Policy Exchange](#) research looked at how the use of technology intermediaries could provide benefits for citizens who are digitally excluded.

Developing a total data approach for government

Like any modern organisation, the government already works with data. And although there are many critics of the pace of progress on releasing government data online, in international circles the UK is often regarded as a leader in the transparency and accountability space. Opening up even more government data is a necessary condition for transforming government, but this isn't enough. Government needs to make more of an effort to use rigorous, data-

driven thinking and problem solving in its everyday activities.

The lean start-up approach is very much in line with the way the Government Digital Service has run its activities over the past few years, and government should extend lean start-up methods as the preferred way of working. Iterative product releases should be the norm across wide areas of government activity, including policymaking, with actionable insights coming back to managers in real time. Digital will finally make it practical to use widespread split tests and randomised control trials to identify the best course of action. Managers will have the evidence they need to pivot early when a project is not working as originally hoped, rather than throwing good money after bad.

However, we are not advocating a wholesale shift to technocratic government and policy by algorithm. There will always be decisions for government to make that are political or rooted in values or philosophy, but the difference is that better use of data means we can have more informed political conversations.

Restoring a culture of excellence and innovation in government

One of the biggest challenges in enabling a truly digital government is neither hardware nor software, but instead changing culture and attitudes. Like many stories about technology, this one is primarily about people.

The next step for making government more open and providing a foundation for collaboration should be to radically increase the transparency of who is doing what – and crucially, what they have done and where they were before. Platforms like LinkedIn have changed the way many people think about networking as part of their professional lives.

Drawing upon this and to aid collaboration, government should introduce an open, online directory of officials, including current responsibilities and previous roles. This need not be a major undertaking – the experience of established social networks suggests that individuals can be left to take responsibility for their own profiles and for establishing connections with current and past colleagues. But it would go beyond the internal directory of government email addresses and phone extensions, and should be open to the public. Along with a unified email address format for everyone working in government, this would be a simple step to massively reduce the practical barriers to open policymaking and community engagement.

For the win

The internet is changing our world in more ways than we could ever have imagined. And as it reaches into every corner of our lives, it is transforming our relationships with one another, the jobs we do and the ways we spend our time. As we head toward the 2015 general election, the potential to use technology, data and the internet to transform government should be top of mind for politicians and policymakers.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Sarah Fink is a Research Fellow in the Digital Government Unit at Policy Exchange. She conducts research on public policy and technology, data and the internet. Previous work has included projects on digital inclusion and engagement, broadband policy and digitising government.