Governments’ Need for Digitization Skills: Understanding and Shaping Vocational Training in the Public Sector

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how while confronted with digitization, governments need to equip their employees with skills for dealing with the upcoming technologies. To date, however, there has been no thorough analysis of which skills governments actually require and how these skills are addressed by (vocational) training. Therefore, the aim of this article is to understand both governments’ needs and the scope of currently offered training as well as identifying the existing gaps by conducting qualitative interviews with employees from HR departments in governments. An understanding of what skills are actually required in public bodies and how they can be classified will be outlined. Furthermore, the challenges and benefits of governments’ decision to offer vocational training are investigated, pointing out gaps that need further investigation. Based on this, implications for theory and practice for the digitization future and vocational trainings in government are derived.

KEYWORDS

Digitization, Education, IT Skills, Public Administration, Vocational Training

INTRODUCTION

Digitization in the form of using smartphones, laptops and other digital devices for the execution of all kinds of tasks via the Internet like online shopping, banking or just information gathering, has not only become an integral part of people’s private everyday life, but has also entered business life deeply. On the one hand, organizations are actively shaping IT (Information Technology) systems by integrating new technologies into their business models and by restructuring their internal processes. On the other hand, with their fast-changing features, new technologies challenge organizations’ competencies and require them to dynamically adapt to this changing environment (Kim, Shin, Kim, & Lee, 2011). Public administrations are no exception in this respect. Quite the contrary: Since the emergence of electronic government (e-government), public administrations are flooded by the appearance of and need to use new technologies, which has the potential to serve as primary innovator in terms of completely changing the way public administrations interact with their stakeholders: It even “becomes a vehicle for societal improvement” (Córdoba-Pachón, 2015, p. 9). At the same time this bears severe implications for the ways of how the work is done and organized, necessitating organizational adjustments (Anthopoulos & Reddick, 2015; Gascó, 2003).

DOI: 10.4018/IJPADA.2018100105

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However, only because government employees might be accustomed to using new technologies in their spare time, this does not mean that they are automatically prepared to use the partially very specialized, not self-explanatory IT that comes into play when looking at the daily work of public administrations nowadays. Public servants find themselves in a completely new situation, having to deal with electronic procedures, which do not only change the work processes but also demand different approaches due to the use of IT. Thus, it does not suffice to have the latest technologies in place. One of the most decisive success factors of e-government implementation and projects is the public servants’ education in this area to equip them with the demanded competencies in order to meet their customers’ expectations (Janowski, Estevez, & Ojo, 2012).

According to Dada (2006, p. 5), there is a profound “lack of skills and training which are required to effectively use an e-government system that is available to government officials and citizens”. A possible remedy to this problem should therefore be a targeted training “in order to be prepared for the future” (Nihoves, 2010, p. 8). Such training should address the variety of needs for dealing with IT in different departments and job positions and provide the employees with the required e-government competencies. Different programs exist such as full study programs, postgraduate studies or vocational training. Whereas IT-related study programs covering several months or years are relevant only to a limited number of specialized employees, vocational training is an adequate option for the majority of the government workforce for several reasons. First, neither all employees have the time to follow a full program nor can all public entities afford to send employees on extensive study programs. In times of scarce public budgets and enforced austerity (Kickert, Randma-Liiv, & Savi, 2015), there is a need for offering vocational trainings for government employees to stay up-to-date. Second, shorter trainings, offered on a regular basis that provide the most important and latest inputs might also be preferred in consideration of the fact that IT is fast-changing and asks for periodic updates. Finally, the training has to address the needs of different target groups. Thus, short-term vocational training lends itself to an appropriate teaching format.

In order to teach government employees the relevant IT skills, the specific needs of governments and the offered vocational trainings need to be aligned. Due to the specific characteristics of governmental work and organization, vocational training methods applied to the private sector cannot be transferred one on one to the public administration domain. Instead, effective training has to take into account the specific needs of the public sector and especially of government employees who are affected by digitization. However, both practice as well as research have failed to consider governments’ specific needs when designing vocational training. Therefore, the questions guiding this study are:

RQ 1: Which needs for vocational training arise due to the increasing digitization in public administrations?
RQ 2: Which kinds of trainings do currently exist and how do they suffice the identified needs?
RQ 3: Which gaps exist between the needs and the offer of vocational training? How can these gaps be closed?

For answering these questions, qualitative interviews with employees in German municipalities in charge of vocational training were conducted to capture the perspective of those who have to implement these digitization efforts: public administrations themselves, which has – to the best of the authors’ knowledge – up to now been an unconsidered point of view. This study synthesizes the status quo and, therefore, serves as a starting point for more theory-driven and more normative research in the future. The results suggest that digitization is an emerging topic for public administrations with many individual initiatives taking place. There is no consensus as to whether public administrations and their employees are sufficiently equipped for this challenge. Although, the interviewees reported a general satisfaction with trainings teaching how to use a specific program, the results suggest that especially comprehensive and strategic IT skills would be valuable.
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