



CAN INSTITUTIONALISM EXPLAIN CONSTRAINTS THAT ARE SLOWING DOWN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION?¹



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Abstract. *The undergoing process of digitalizing public services all around the world is probably the biggest challenge the public sector has encountered this century and at the same time facing serious setbacks and problems in all the countries going through it. No matter if we talk about simple data digitization or actual digital transformation of entire systems and organizations, the digital change comes as a major threat to existing institutions that have been part of the public system for decades and should be addressed not only as a matter of resources and access to digital tools, but also as a phenomena that affects most of the rules and norms that public servants have been following so far, causing organizational change. This article wishes to address the topic of digitalization in the public sector from an institutional point of view, trying to understand if the already existing norms might pose as a setback for organizational change and if taking them into consideration might contribute to a faster, easier and more efficient process, explain and prevent certain possible setbacks. The first chapters will present a small theoretical introduction regarding digitalization, institutionalism and organizational change as main concepts, along with examples relevant for the present discussion, followed by a short description of interviews conducted with public servants in Romania, in an attempt to understand what main difficulties are they experiencing in the process of digitalizing public services and how much of their reluctance comes from the existing sets of norms and habits, or from actual educational or resource related problems.*

Keywords: *Institutionalism, Digital Transformation, Digitalization, Organizational Transformation, Public Administration, Normative Institutionalism.*

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1. Introduction

Public services and the entire activity of public administration are one of the most important pillars of a democratic society and they represent the most direct interaction a citizen can have with the government and the state itself. During the last century, the way public administration has been organized changed dramatically throughout a number of different reform streams, from Weber's bureaucracy with the classical hierarchy in the public sector to the era of privatization and New Public Management as a response to the acknowledged problems and a way to improve public management by implementing principles from the private sector, all the way to the New Digital Era we are currently still experiencing.

Even if different countries and sides of the world experience different stages of change in the public administration and not all of them were part of the first two types of the reform, I strongly consider that the digitalization process and the existence of Internet and digital technology started affecting all types of administration around the world, making it almost impossible for the public system not to start adapting to the needs of the citizens and the society.

In terms of actually applying digital change, the private sector took it as an opportunity to extend the types of services they are offering, to make them faster, more efficient and easier to manage (Schildt, 2022). At the same time, the public sector, especially in the Eastern European countries, like the ones I have been studying, faced severe adversities when it came to adapting and including digital tools in their daily activity, and not only because of the lack of resources, but also because of the reluctance of the public servants themselves.

In order to be able to analyze the challenges digitalization is facing, the first part of the paper will be describing the main stages of this process, the specific elements they imply and explain which elements of them can also be influenced by the human factor.

Trying to understand what drives people to stand in the way of change and refuse policies that can actually be useful for their daily activity and transform their working environment according to the present available technologies and digital tools, I studied different theories that are used in researching and understanding human behavior. Starting with the institutionalism theory and its work on how institutions as a set of norms and regulations can seriously influence the way people make certain decision or adapt to different situations all the way to organizational change, the following parts will be explaining main theoretical ideas that have been part of this study.



The second part of the paper will be describing the normative institutionalism, based on the work of B. Guy Peters (Peters, 2019), starting with a short history of institutionalism itself and then defining institutions and the role they play in political science analysis, the formation of institutions, institutional change and the way they interact with individuals, then continuing with analyzing the work of Kwangseon Hwang on organizational change from a neo-institutional point of view (Hwang, 2023).

Last but not least, I will be describing an empirical study I implemented, based on interviews with members of the public sector in Romania, in order to test if some of the reasons they consider themselves reluctant to digitalization can be linked to the norms they have been used to for a long time or the institutions they are still believing in and are not at all willing to give up in order to accept change. Therefore, the main hypothesis of the paper will be if digitalization reforms contradict existing organizational norms, then public servants will be reluctant to them.

When it comes to the research questions, the main ones will be:

- What does digitalization mean to public servants?
- To what extent do the existing organizational norms contradict the principles of digitalization?
- To what extent do public servants consider themselves open to change?
- How dedicated are public servants to the existing norms?

If the research hypothesis will be confirmed, then the current paper will be able to bring valuable information regarding the main reasons public servants tend to be reluctant to change, especially when it comes to the digitalization reforms. On the contrary, if the hypothesis will not be confirmed, the study will still offer insights to the topic by answering the main research questions and bringing to attention future possible research directions.

No matter how many resources it needs or how expensive it might be, the process of transforming public services from face-to-face interaction to digital platforms is still strongly influenced by the existing public servants and their leaders. Therefore, understanding the reasons they are slowing the process down and the problems they are facing, we could be able to make digitalization faster, easier, more efficient and better adapted to the needs of the people, both as citizens and public servants.



2. Digital transformation and its previous phases

Along with the mass usage of Internet of Things (IOT), Personal Computers (PC) and smartphones that were able to access momentarily what could have taken months if working in an archive full of printed documents, the public administration faced some serious changes and encountered its third massive reform phenomena, under the changes of the New Digital Era (DEG), but of course, not everything happened at once and was for sure not uniform all around the world, given the fact that systems adapted to the needs and evolution of their citizen, their form of government and priorities of the people in power.

Considering the fact that up until the 21st century, public administration was based entirely on documents that were written by hand or, in the best-case scenarios, typewriters, the appearance of computers and printers and the ability to text information and create digital archives caused the first main type of digital intervention in public administration, which was the stage of **digitization**.

At first sight, the process of digitization represents the first basic step of entering the Digital Era, without relevant changes in the way an organization is working or its internal norms, but more likely a process through which already existing data on paper are transferred to a digital format, so that they can be universally, easily accessed not only by the people in the same building at the same time, but actually all over the system, no matter where the users are. According to MarryAnne Gobble, the digitization represents the main process through which you can transform turning pages into bytes (Gobble, 2018), or better said the moment when one is scanning written documents, transforming recordings and entering data in a specific digital database, so that anyone can access them digitally and why not even online.

The second very important change brought by technology to public administration is the **digitalization** itself, which describes all the phases during which the public services and organizations start involving digital tools or means of communication in order to deliver what otherwise could have happened just in person or by printed communication.

For example, the fact that a public organization starts having an online presence, like a website or a public profile on different online platforms means that even if its internal activities are just the same, the citizens are also able to access online information without having to travel all the way to the physical offices and can at the same time interact with public servants through e-mail, online chats or other digital channels. This step is definitely more complex than the



digitization process, but more importantly, it starts implying the will of public servants and their abilities to use digital tools in order to communicate with people and offer services in an online environment, not only face to face, while at the same time, it adds a list of more tasks to their daily activity (Nygren *et. al*, 2013).

Last but not least, the most important and usually final phase of digitalizing public services is the **digital transformation**. If the previous two phases were based mostly on starting to use digital technology and tools along with online presence in order to improve public services, this one comes at a point where technology is already so well included in the daily activity of a public organization, that it starts affecting change in the way the system is working, in the way employees are organized in departments and especially the type of services they can offer. For example, digital transformation might imply launching an online platform where a person can register for all the public services they might need online, from scheduling a doctor's appointment to announcing that they are getting married or having a new-born, like the case of northern European countries, reducing the actual human interaction to zero.

Having described the main three phases that the public administration could go through in the process of involving digital tools and technology as a part of the New Digital Era reforms, it is clear that the digitalization and the digital transformation reforms are the most complex ones and do involve the support and will of the public employees, including the leaders of public organizations. But what if the people are not willing to be part of the digital change? Can the idea of adding new tasks and transforming the way public services looked like for over a century be a reason for public servants to fear and refuse digitalization? Can the old norms they have been respecting for so long stay in the way of the reform? I will be addressing possible answers to these questions in the following chapters, by discussing the institutional perspective on how individuals make decisions and adapt to real life changes, and also analyzing answers to actual interviews with public servants of Romania, currently facing the challenges of digitalization and organizational change.

3. The institutionalist perspective on organizational change

Institutionalism is one of the most important theories in political science, having been suffered a series of changes from what we now call the old institutionalism, to the new institutionalism which is a response to the main critics of the old one, and all the way to the neo-institutionalism, as a mix of the previous two, better adapted to the needs of science for current research and also



divided into multiple subtypes, according to the type of social sciences that might be using it, like historical institutionalism, sociological institutionalism, empirical institutionalism, and so on and so forth. In political science, institutionalism started as a response to the already existing theories that were based mostly on the study of individualistic assumptions, like the behavioralism and rational choice theory. If these two particular approaches were based on the assumption that no matter the environment or the situation they are in, individuals act according to their own needs and wishes in order to maximize their utility, the institutionalist approach was developed in order to respond to a theoretical gap and started with the subject of formal and informal institutions, bringing into attention the fact that even if individuals are concerned with their own well-being, in some cases they might also act according to the norms or rules they are used to, even if they might not always be in their best interest (Peters, 2019).

In the current paper, I will be discussing the theory on which the normative institutionalism is based. As the title itself reflects, in this approach the norms and values that exist as part of an organization have a very important role when it comes to explaining the behavior of individuals (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). According to Granovetter and the normative institutionalism, individuals should not be seen as atomistic entities, but rather as a constant part of a set of connections and complex series of relationships with collectivities (Granovetter, 1985). In other words, it can be said that one individual might be loyal to a series of different institutions at the same time, which means that in the choices he or she makes, there will always be a battle between which institution is more important or valid at the moment of a certain choice and they will be affecting the way one reacts to events such as major changes in society or their daily activities.

At the same time, it is important to take into consideration the fact that individuals can be rational even if they act according to certain institutions, a concept very well defined by the idea of bounded rationality. Therefore, even if they intend to be rational, most of the times they cannot be perfectly rational but rather they react in the limit of the procedures that bound them, their personal cognitive limitations and the values of the institutions within which they are making decisions (Simon, 1947; Peters, 2019). Given the situation, their choices can be considered rational in that specific moment but should also be seen as temporary, as if a change in institutions might mean a change for their choices too.



3.1. Defining institutions

Going further with the study of the institutionalism perspective, there is a subsequent need to clarify what should be understood from the concept of institutions themselves. Even if the term institution is used for a variety of meanings in political science, it can define a range of elements from formal structures like the government or the parliament all the way to ideas like social class, education or even the set of laws in a country (Teubner, 1986).

In order to be able to use it properly in the current paper, there is a need for a clearer, well-defined explanation, like the one from March and Olsen. According to their paper, an institution is not necessarily a formal structure, but rather is better understood as a collection of norms, rules, understandings, and perhaps most importantly routines (March and Olsen, 1989). They also later on define institutions in terms of characteristics they display, along with their members (Peters, 2019), clarifying the fact that the political institutions are collections of interrelated rules and routines that define appropriate actions in terms of relations between roles and situations. Also, in their view, institutions are defined by their durability and their capacity to influence behavior of individuals for generations (March and Olsen, 1989). All in all, I will be using the term institution in this article as defining a collection of values and rules that are most of the time normative, rather than cognitive, when they impact individuals and at the same time routines developed in order to assure the implementation of those values (Peters, 2019).

According to Macdonald, whenever an institution is effective in influencing the behavior of its members, they will constantly consider the norms already implemented when making a choice, and take them into consideration before they even think about the consequences they might face themselves. To make this statement even clearer, Macdonald presents the example of the soldiers, who after joining the military service are trained to internalize certain rules and regulations, ways to react in specific situations, which later on influence the way they act in combat, making them choose actions extremely dangerous for themselves, or even lethal, for the sole reason of respecting the institutions they are part of (Macdonald, 1983).

Even if at first sight it might look like a stretch and an entirely different field, it is, in my opinion, relevant to consider if members of public administration could also face the same problem in the face of reform – the entirety of norms and routines already strong enough to guide their everyday work activity which are not necessarily functional when it comes to the digital reform.



Along with this idea, it is also important to mention the principle of “appropriate behavior”, which tends to connect very well with the effect of institutions of individuals’ choices, which for March and Olsen comes from the idea that human behavior is generally intentional but not willful (March and Olsen, 1989). In other words, even if the individuals will be making conscious choices, they will most likely remain within the limits of the institutions they are part of, and they have been used to. When it comes to public institutions, the logic of appropriateness can be manifested just as well as in other extreme fields like the one previously mentioned, by considering what is the normal and expected thing to do on the job, as in serving citizens as good as possible and not engaging in any acts of corruption (Quah, 2016). According to Peters, these are routine standards for proper behavior, but in this normative conception of institutions the routine itself seems to appear as the most important (Peters, 2019). Going even further, Helms conceptualizes the logic of appropriateness as a version of role theory, considering that an institution defines a set of behavioral expectations regarding the individuals who occupy positions within the organization, based on what is considered appropriate (Helms, 2004), and therefore are most likely to reward conformity while at the same time sanction the lack of it in several ways.

Taking this into consideration, role theory can be seen as a general way of linking individuals and their institutions (Beyers, 2005) and responds to the need of institutionalism to find a way to link the macro-level constraints and values of an institution to the micro-level behavior of the occupants, and the roles they perform. Nevertheless, it is important to analyze how much uniformity is required before we can say an institution actually exists, even more as the question may differ for different social situations, depending on the formality of rules required, and the degree of variation among the raw material, in this case, individuals among the institution (Peters, 2019).

Given the fact that this article’s topic refers mainly to the process of digitalization and digital transformation, we can use the premises offered by the normative institutionalism to consider that no matter the change the state wants to implement regarding public administration, it will face the presence of already existing norms and routines of the public servants, the roles they’ve already internalized, along with the resistance of institutions that might be broken or seriously transformed along with the reform itself.



3.2. Types of organizational change

No matter how vast and diverse the concept of public administration is, in order to analyze it and its actual transformations along with the different currents of reform, it is more efficient to look at the organizations itself, as the actual core of the administration. In other words, if one wants to observe the differences digital tools bring to the public administration, its organizational activities and processes, the best way to start is to choose certain organizations and study them along with their transformation, no matter what form they take.

Regardless of the reform we are talking about, any major change has to bring organizational change and the New Digital Era makes no exception. In order to include new types of tools, active digital presence or even transform a wide range of services from face-to-face interaction to digital platforms, a considerable amount of organizational changes should take place, certain norms need to be changed or even left behind and, more importantly, the members of the organization need to be willing and able to adapt to them.

According to Kraatz and Moore, organizational change can be defined as the abandonment of old institutionalized practices, structures, and goals and the adoption of institutional contradictory practices, structures and goals by individual organization or field of organizations (Kraatz and Moore, 2002). When talking about organizational change, it is considered that it can be caused by two major typed of elements, the endogenous and the exogenous forces. According to Calvert, organizational change can be caused by endogenous forces such as shifts in organizational culture from within the organization and the change of internal norms (Calvert, 2017), while at the same time Greenwood stresses the fact that endogenous forces are just as important, in the form of change of political power and institutional environment (Greenwood, 2011).

In comparison to private entities, public organizations do not have to luxury of changing easily or adapting to any types of technologies that appear along the society, given the fact that they carry much bigger responsibilities and they are not able to just fail or bankrupt and start over any time. When we talk about reforms in the public administration, we need to take into consideration that public services can never be suspended for a while in order to be improved, experiments cannot be made without seriously affecting the needs of the population and change is not something one can “try” and later on take back because maybe it did not work as good as expected. Considering all of the above, I believe that organizational change in the public sector needs to be analyzed thoroughly and studied from several different points of view before even



considering making assumptions about the way these work, adapt to change and why they occasionally don't do it.

Greenwood and Hinings consider that there is an important distinction between the ways in which change occurs, given the fact that it might be a gradual or a radical one. They say gradual change, also called convergent change can occur in within the parameters of an existing archetype, while on the other hand, radical change occurs when an organization moves from to pattern currently in use to another one, therefore causing a distinct break (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996). In my view, the digital reforms can be considered both radical and gradual changes, depending on the way they appear and the complexity of the change that is being implemented. For example, the step of digitizing public data can be easily seen as a gradual change, as public servants slowly start to save data in a different type of format than before, while on the other hand digital transformation implies changing the entire flow of a public organization, from services to employee's role, which can be seen as a radical change.

As previously explained by Hwang, the impact changes have in an organization, no matter if they are radical or gradual, plays a crucial role in determining the organization's overall health and well-being. More specifically, gradual changes tend to facilitate smoother transitions, like for example choosing to publish official forms from a public organization on a digital online platform, along with still offering them in a printed format at the local address of the organization, a change which employees can easily adapt to and one that do not deviate from their current practice. On the other hand, radical changes like implementing digital transformation, changing an entire area of services or the way an organization works has the potential to be disruptive and might be met with resistance, while coming as a response to either a crisis or very ineffective practices.

One of the main differences between the two types of organizational change are the actual results they might bring, considering the fact that gradual change would be promoting stability and continuity, which are both valuable for the organization legitimacy, but at the same type come with small changes on a general level, while the radical one tend to be the engine of real change, driving innovation and redefining an organization's mission or even goals (Hwang, 2023).



3.3. Deinstitutionalization

The process of deinstitutionalization appears in an organization when a set of accepted, institutional norms or beliefs slowly become more fragile, they weaken or actually disappear and is considered by Oliver (1992) to be caused by three possible sources of pressure: functional, political and social.

The functional pressure arises from perceived problems in performance levels of the utility associated with institutionalized practices (Hwang, 2023). For example, we see a lot of cases of public transportation systems that have to adapt to a very dynamic environment and set of needs of the citizens and tend to reach a point where their performance level decreases and the public satisfaction lower as well. Sometimes, one of the reasons for these kinds of situations stands in the old management practices or norms that are not efficient anymore, but at the same time very difficult to adapt to the current needs or situations.

The political pressure, on the other hand, results from the shifts of interests and underlying power distribution that support and legitimize existing institutional arrangements (Dacin *et al*, 2002). For example, at the point where the political power in a country puts a lot of pressure on transparency in the public sector, as a result of the will of the people, the public sector might be forced to give up on the secrecy they have been considering normal in a non-democratic system for example and adapt to publicly sharing their statement of wealth, their salaries or any other type of information that might have been considered to be sensitive up to that point.

Last but not least, social pressure might also influence deinstitutionalization and institutional change, as long as elements like cultural diversity, changes in the workforce and different types of beliefs might force certain norms to change, like the fact that a person can not have anything covering his or her hair while taking pictures for an ID Card, up to the point where a growing population of muslim women or Indian men could argue that this kind of norm is against their culture and might be considered discriminatory.

4. Predictors of organizational change

As economic analysts might be able to identify signs that the economy would thrive or hit a critical moment in the near future, political scientists have been able to identify a number of elements that can predict the occurrence of organizational change and when should we expect for it to be happening. Oliver (1991) identifies predictors of organizational change in terms of



different factors that affect how public organizations deal with various type of institutional pressure, and they are called “the five Cs”, explaining an organization’s response to institutional pressure: *cause, constituents, contents, control* and *context*.

As the name does already describe, the *cause* concerns the reasons why the organization is pressed to adapt to institutional rules or expectations, including rational motives such as efficiency or economic benefits, as well as motives, such as legitimacy or social convenience of conforming to institutional rules (Fernandez-Alles & Llamas Sanchez, 2008).

The constituents refer to stakeholders, including the state, or other actors that can exert institutional pressure on the organization. For example, these stakeholders can comprise relevant professional, occupational, and other interest groups, users of services, the media and the public. Even if public organizations usually exert institutional pressure on others, they also have to tackle pressures in order to gain external support from multiple and divergent stakeholders in order to achieve legitimacy (Fernandez-Alles & Llamas Sanchez, 2004). In many cases, any particular public organization will have multiple well-defined stakeholders, and the organization will show a higher degree of dependence on these stakeholders because the legitimacy they grant (Feldman, 2005).

The contents refer to the nature of the rules or requirements derived from institutional pressures. The institutional pressure of contents can be classified as regulatory, normative and mimetic (Meyer and Rowan).

When it comes to the *control factors*, they describe the means and mechanisms through which pressure is exercised. In most public services, pressure primarily includes regulations whose influence is difficult to avoid. However, public institutions are also subject to pressures from various other stakeholders besides those with governmental or legal authority (Fernandez-Alles & Llamas Sanchez, 2008).

Last but not least, *the context* refers to the environment within which institutional pressures are exerted. When environmental changes happen, institutions may either respond, endure and flourish or be weakened and give way to new ones, creating a process of deinstitutionalization (Oliver, 1992).



5. Methodology

In order to understand and study further the process of digital transformation and the way digital tools affect how the public sector works in our current day, I decided to try to understand what makes public servants, for example, be so reluctant to digitalizing public services, in an era during which even them, as regular people, use online communication platforms, electronic shopping and even websites with news or other useful data.

Therefore, I decided to conduct a series of interviews with people working in public administration in order to understand how they stand towards change and what it is that makes it so hard for some of them to accept it, if that is really the case, or if it is just a matter of education and resources, as in they do not adapt to change because they do not possess a certain set of skills or tools.

My hypothesis was that be if digitalization reforms contradict existing organizational norms, then public servants will be reluctant to them. In other words, I considered that if a person is used to delivering a service in a certain way, it might be difficult for him or her to adapt to doing it completely differently or using different channels, like changing from face to face to online interaction for example.

It was clear for me that the type of research I need in order to be able to broaden this topic is a qualitative research, which offers the opportunity to question less participants, but at the same time offers more time to discuss with them and obtain valuable data for an exploratory study like I consider this one to be.

In order to conduct this type of research, I had to establish the research method and decide which one best applies to the situation in question, and then decide what types of questions will be included in order to both respect confidentiality and the comfort of the interviewed individuals, while at the same time obtain the necessary data for the research topic.

I also had to decide how to find a specific sample, representative for both men and women, no matter the religion, culture, skin color or political preferences they might identify with, followed by deciding how to contact them in order to make sure they are honest and feel safe to answer to my questions without other colleagues hearing or being able to judge them in any way.

Therefore, I decided that the best method I could be using in this particular situation was the semi-structured interview, considering the fact that it is a direct method that allows the



researcher to start with a particular range of questions but also adapt them to the ongoing discussions on the spot, while at the same time making sure that the person will be answering without any distractions and also go all the way to the end of the session. The time frame of the analysis had to be tight, as in the interviews needed to be conducted in less than one month apart one from the other, in order to make sure legal regulations have not changed and the political situation in the country was the same, so that it could not influence the responders in ways that could interfere with the study itself and their answers.

After the background questions regarding basic data like age, gender, studies, marital status or cultural and political preferences some of the main questions that were addressed were:

- How does change at the workplace make you feel?
- How important is for you to preserve the norms you have been following for a long time at your work place?
- Do you feel like digitalizing public services might change the way that you have been working so far?
- Do you feel the need to protect old regulations in the moment new ones appear?
- Would you be willing to work in a completely digitalized environment starting tomorrow?
- Is it easier to adapt to changes in the workplace if they happen slowly and one by one?
- Does it help you when someone clearly explains the changes that are about to take place?

All the questions were addressed in this particular order, but in between the discussion started by each and every one of them continued, so that the respondents could have the time and possibility to express their very own opinions and talk about their personal experiences, in order for me to better understand the subject of study.

6. Results and conclusion

After conducting interviews with ten of total members of a Romanian public organization which is currently going through an entire process of digitalizing public services and changing its day by day practices, I had the opportunity to see the view of both men and women aged between 30 and 65 years old, with more or less experience in the public sector but similar regarding the work place and the experiences they are currently going through regarding the digitalization



reform. At the point where I stopped the interviews because of the data saturation, I had reached the conclusion that even if the study could be extended to way more participants, most of the information would repeat itself and lead to the same main conclusion.

In other words, 8 out of 10 public servants that participated in the interview mentioned that norms are very important in their field of work and actually explained with confidence that any possible changes that could affect or change them is very dangerous and could destabilize the way the organization currently functions.

Moreover, half of them also answered that the idea of digitalizing public administration consists of a lot of changes in the internal rules they already respect and institutions like the public office, registration numbers of even the paper file could be destroyed along with the appearance of digitalized public services, which is not something they are comfortable with for starter.

What surprised me the most during the interviews was that, even during the first part they kept saying that evolution is important and digital tools have the potential to change the way they work in a positive manner and they would like to use them for certain practices but the moment they were questioned about specific reforms such as online forms, transparency through digital information, answering to online letters and complaints instead of postal ones or accepting digital certified signatures, the way they saw digital solutions was completely different, in a negative way. Most of the time, they could not even explain with objective reasons or practical examples why the reforms mentioned above could be a bad practice instead of a good one, but the only repetitive reason was that they were not what has been used so far or “they are not the same with a written form, a hand-written signature, a face to face interaction” and so on and so forth, meaning that the carry way less value.

Along with the results regarding the way individuals feel about change and the deinstitutionalization of certain norms, another find was that if I am to compare the stages of applying digital reform to public administration and services to the classification Greenwood and Hinings did regarding gradual and radical change, there is a very clear and strong connection that can help explain organizational transformation. More exactly, according to the definitions previously explained in this paper, the three stages of digitising, digitalizing and digital transformation do imply different types of organizational change. For example, it is clear that digital transformation, as a reform during which public organizations change not only the way they deliver services but also their entire system, type of employees and the way they



function, can be considered a radical change, which makes it harder to accept by the individuals implied and can be faced with resistance. During the interviews I have conducted, two of the participants offered examples of the way public administration was forcefully digitalized during the COVID- 19 pandemic, in order to explain how difficult it was for them to adapt and moreover accept the change of norms during such a radical type of change, whilst admitting that slower processes like digitising data or simply combining the use of written forms or signatures with digital ones were still challenging, but at the same time easier to accept because they did not imply giving up older norms or regulations entirely.

Moreover, it was clearly stated by more than half of the participants that one of the main reasons they sometimes fear such reforms is the fact that they do not come with a previous warning or explanation, like a session during which a leader of the organization can explain everybody what is about to change, how will it affect them and what they should definitely not worry about.

In other words, it can be said that the main hypothesis of the study itself and of this paper was partially confirmed by the fact that the process of digital reform in public administration and the challenges it faces should also be analyzed through the lens of neo-institutionalist normative perspective, especially the way it explains how norms have the power to influence the individuals' behavior in certain situations. Moreover, the results of the interview showed how important it is to take into consideration the fact that the more radical a change is, the more likely it is for the public servants or even the beneficiaries to be reluctant to it or find it hard to replace certain old regulations with new ones just because of the institutional pressure.

The applicability of this study is, in my opinion, important for the developing countries that are still experiencing the first two stages of digital change in public administration. This part of the research raises important questions regarding possible challenges not necessarily in reforming systems, services or resources, but more likely in reforming the way people that are implementing them actually think and work towards or against them. By studying organizational change through neo- institutionalism, we might find a way to understand how norms and regulations can influence the process of digitalizing public services and how should they be treated and taken into consideration in order for employees to support change, not resist it simply because it is not linear with their previous habits.



Last but not least, it is important to mention that the study discussed in this current paper has been organized by interviewing a limited number of participants from a single type of public organizations, for reasons that concern financial resources and the fact that it was meant to be tested on a small representative number of individuals in order to understand if the method is well-suited for the study and if the pre-established questions should be reduced or multiplied, in order to obtain the most complex and relevant answers. In order to be able to support my theory I will be extending the study to individuals from several public organizations, even from different cities if the possibility will be available, in order to obtain a more general, clearer and wholesome perspective on the way norms and regulations, according to the normative neo-institutionalist perspective, can actually manage to stay in the way of reforming and digitalizing public services, or simply slow them down.

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