It’s time for government to REALLY put people first

The current uncertain times have brought attention to the public sector as never before: it’s revealed what it does and does not do well and the urgent need for not only a digital transformation but also a new way of thinking about government.
Introduction

Everything has changed

“Everything changes. We know that. But usually, change doesn't happen so quickly and as fundamentally as it has in 2020,” says Keith Moore Fujitsu’s Customer Services Executive, “This is really different.’

“2020 has made the need for change in the public sector all the more urgent,” says Thierry Kahane, Emerging Technologies Practice Leader with Fujitsu, “And that’s a good thing. The pressure which rapid change puts on people makes them creative and even more determined to achieve good outcomes. That’s exciting... and terrifying too.”

Keith and Thierry joined Fujitsu colleagues, Robert Lai, the company’s Head of Public Sector Industry in North America, and Mohit Agrawal, Senior Director Application Transformation, to discuss how digital can play a key role in re-setting government, not just for the 21st century but a completely new era for government.

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Our interviewees are:

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<th>Role</th>
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<td>Thierry Kahane</td>
<td>Emerging Technologies Practice Leader</td>
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<td>Robert Lai</td>
<td>Head of Public Sector Industry, North America</td>
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<td>Mohit Agrawal</td>
<td>Senior Director Application Transformation</td>
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<td>Keith Moore</td>
<td>Customer Services Executive</td>
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The big problem is that, over the last four decades, ‘government’ has become about money, not people. When commentators talk about ‘efficiency’ and ‘value for money’ they’re talking about making the public sector smaller and more about financial returns on investment, than about the true measure of good government: the wellbeing of the citizens it serves.

The current time has changed that. The crisis has pivoted the priorities of government at all levels from financial spreadsheets to saving lives. It’s clear that the countries with strong public health infrastructures coped better than those without. The nations which focused on wellbeing saw their leaders’ poll numbers rise. Trust increased in government – local, regional, and federal. That might have surprised some commentators – especially those whose mantra was ‘small government’ at any cost. The point is that when a societal threat appears people turn to government to provide a bulwark against catastrophe.

It should be no surprise. When Franklin D. Roosevelt uttered his famous dictum, ‘We have nothing to fear except fear itself’ at his first inauguration in 1933, he ushered in a new era of active government which tackled the Great Depression and enabled the Allied powers to fight a war against Fascism. It was an analog era that put mobilized people and machines to achieve (in relative terms) an amazingly productive and creative era which, once the war was won, generated the most sustained level of GDP growth ever seen. A level that has not been matched since.

The point is, that era was about using government to benefit people. And we believe that this current uncertain time is a chance to re-set the public sector using digital technologies to not just adapt to ways of working and interacting socially, but in the very essence of what it means to be a public servant. Digital can transform not just how things are done but why they are done. The focus must be on serving citizens, fulfilling their rights based on the founding principles of government. The digital delivery of Lincoln’s enduring phrase; ‘of the people, by the people, for the people.’
It’s happening, in New Zealand a ‘well-being budget’ has been created which focuses on improving lives and not spreadsheets. It’s built on ‘12 domains’ and they are self-explanatory:

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<th>The 12 domains of current wellbeing</th>
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And it’s happening in Estonia, a small state which, when it was freed from Soviet control made the most of a ‘blank slate’ and a tight budget to enable digital technologies to take them into a new era of active government. The Baltic nation quickly became the example everyone cited, but the pandemic has revealed that, despite some setbacks, Estonia has achieved a real breakthrough in how 21st century government could – and can be delivered. Estonians do almost everything civil online – from voting, to health, to education, and personal information. That deep digital infrastructure meant they could swiftly react to lockdown, not just by doing what everyone else was doing, but by ‘hacking the crisis.’ They even created a specific chatbot – called Suve – to provide citizens with government focused information for citizens, especially those in vulnerable groups.

Both New Zealand and Estonia show that government can be redefined, but only when there’s a willingness to break out of the shackles of ideologies which have dominated the world over the last 40 years. Yes, they are both small states, but that makes them even more relevant: great strides can be made at the local and regional / state levels as well as by the federal government.

At Fujitsu, we are founded on the same human-centric principles. Our technologies and partnerships with customers which see us co-create tailored solutions to specific needs are totally aligned with New Zealand’s approach. We believe that the same kind of principles can be delivered across North America. It just takes political will and the right technologies and digital transformation initiatives to make it happen.

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3 Forbes ibid
It will cost a lot of money. Money is bound to be in short supply once the pandemic has passed. That’s what we will be told. In fact, we are already being told it. Carla Fink, Associate Professor of Public Administration and Policy at the American University warns that there will be severe pressure on public sector budgets at all levels and that the urge to cut services will undermine the efficacy of government. It will also mean, possibly, the loss of infrastructure projects and widespread redundancies.

It’s only logical that budgets will be scrutinized and there will be calls for returning to the pre-pandemic levels of investment. But we believe that would be the wrong thing to do. Digital is already delivering efficiencies in old ways of doing things, as well as offering new ways to do more for less. The pandemic proved that government services can keep running even when people are NOT in the office or at service desks in physical locations. Digital enables them to work anywhere with good machines and no need for expensive real estate.

Why can’t we take New Zealand style principles and interpret them digitally? We can offer public servants greater choice in how they work – to keep them safe, to achieve a better work-life balance, and crucially to boost productivity and efficiency – so that the public sector is as flexible, adaptive, and resilient as possible. For instance, working at home: that’s worked well. Some authorities are looking at halving their real estate portfolio, but there’s a need for a mixed approach. Some people WANT to work in an office, others don’t need to. Research shows that younger workers prefer offices, whilst older cohorts (especially those with families) have enjoyed working at home and want to continue.

The point is total flexibility. It’s key to our ability to serve citizens. If public servants can work in ways that suit them, they will be happier, improve their knowledge and skills, use their time better, and improve their wellbeing. Key elements in that ‘Well-being’ strategy we mentioned.

That has a knock-on effect: happier more motivated workers deliver better more efficient services that benefit citizens and reduce social problems. So, the cost of NOT taking this approach will be bigger than implementing it.

And it does NOT have to cost the earth. Digital delivers more bang for every buck.

5 https://www.axios.com/work-office-coronavirus-survey-d2f2bb17-65b8-4c95-82f7-6fa82f71e428.html

‘The cost of NOT doing is bigger than the cost of doing it’
‘We are all citizens. We are all invested in making government better’

“There’s a real desire for change out there,” says Mohit, “And also a willingness to be honest about what doesn’t work and what does and what needs to change at speed and at scale to get ahead of the needs of citizens.”

“We need to really listen to citizens. And do it together; as partners with government organizations, and as citizens too,” stresses Robert, “This isn’t about selling services and technologies, it’s much more fundamental than that. It’s about a public sector renaissance which will benefit citizens far into the future. For instance, answering the question, ‘How can we get schools open and keep them open as we adapt to a world with COVID-19?’ In Estonia they started from a great digital base and had for years been enabling lifelong learning via online education.

That infrastructure was in place already, so when schools were closed, they were able to switch to 100% virtual schooling very fast. We can all learn from their experience. Be digital. Be prepared.”

“We are all citizens, after all,” says Keith, “We are all invested in making government better. If it works for everyone, then society can progress. That’s the human-centric approach that we believe in at Fujitsu. We always have.”

And that’s the key point of this paper: How can we be leaders of a new wave of reform and renewal across the public sector, and enable public servants to fulfill their duties to citizens in new ways by leveraging the power of digital in all its forms?

“It’s the outcomes that count,” says Thierry, “Our job is to match the right technologies to what public sector customers want to achieve.”

“It’s also about ensuring that legacy investments keep paying dividends,” says Mohit, “Sure, change will be rapid, that the coffers aren’t bottomless. You’re going to have to make the most of what you have in many cases and sweat those assets harder.”

Introduction // “The public sector must be about the ‘public’ not ‘government’” // “The cost of NOT doing it is bigger than the cost of doing it” // “We are all citizens. We are all invested in making government better” // “Government was always more agile than people thought” // “This is no time to be risk averse, it’s a time to be bold” // “Data is at the core but so is data privacy and security” // “The public sector will never look and feel the same again” // “It might be a renaissance, but money will still be tight” // “We never start the conversation with technology”
"I worked in government for years," says Robert Lai, "and I know how policies get formed and then go through various levels of decision making. Some people characterize the process as slow and bureaucratic, and sure it can be, but often it's not, it's pretty agile. We need to harness that and accelerate it."

Mohit agrees, "It's easy to focus on what doesn't work so well, and we need to be honest, there is a lot that doesn't work. For instance, I recently had the honor of becoming a US citizen and I discovered that the various agencies that shared my data couldn't get their act together for three months. I thought I'd take the oath and it will fall into place, but it didn't. But that's not the big picture. The big picture is that government has been changing and is getting better."

"Yes, that's right, but change was incremental," interjects Thierry, "We saw a lot of incremental change – in fact, many years of it – and there was progress, but it was pretty slow."

"But it turns out the government is more agile than many people think," says Keith, "Once the pandemic took hold, you had that incremental change you talked about, but then there was a sudden surge of urgency. The public sector had to respond, or the citizens would suffer. Suddenly, a considerable proportion of the staff working for the government went home to work and stay safe, and government services kept running and became even more efficient. It was amazing. Now that changed everything!"

"Sure," Thierry responds, "That's my point. We all expected there'd be years of painful adoption to get digital working so it could transform how the public sector worked, but then it just... well... worked. If you look across the Atlantic to the NHS in the UK, you'll find that telemedicine, though long touted as a gamechanger, hadn't really cut through into people's daily lives. COVID-19 came along and, within a few weeks, doctors all over the country were doing consultations online for millions of patients. Now, that is agile."

"It's happening in North America too," says Robert, "The public sector is more than capable of thinking in new ways, it just needs that spark. And I believe that at their core, most public sector leaders and workers understand that they have a duty to focus on change and improvement because, in the end, we all depend on the services that the sector provides."

"If there's one core principle which the pandemic proved,' says Mohit, "It's that we're all in this together, and we are all invested in making the public sector a success."

Government was always more agile than people thought'
A recent article in *Foreign Policy* magazine assessed the impact of the pandemic on different forms of government worldwide; it stressed that in modern democracies the events of 2020 could prove to be a watershed in attitudes to government but only if public sector leaders acted with boldness and confidence. 10 experts surveyed the prospects for the next couple of years and concluded that democracies had the chance to prove that they could be more efficient, flexible, and responsive than any other form of government.

This is, simply, a unique opportunity for us all, as the article points out; “We are all statist now. Since the coronavirus pandemic struck and the global economy unraveled, we have looked to governments to mobilize medical resources, implement containment measures, and spend previously unimaginable sums to support workers and businesses. Out of these emergency policies could arise new institutions and ways of solving problems that will benefit us long after the pandemic.”

“This is not time to be risk-averse,” says Thierry, “Digital has to be right at the top of the agenda. And, like we said before, it’s not all about technologies, it’s about outcomes. That’s what the Estonia and New Zealand examples we mentioned earlier both prove.”

“Exactly, and we need to ensure that we strengthen the ethic of service that the public service must live by,” says Mohit, “While delivering the joined-up consistency which I needed when I became a citizen. It might sound trite to say that citizens should expect consistent service across all agencies just as they would expect consistency from a brand like McDonald’s. I know that’s easy to say, but if we can deliver it, then it becomes just something citizens get used to. It fosters trust as well as engagement. People get what they want when they need it. In Estonia, all the things people need from their government ARE joined up. That boosts trust.”

“Is the public sector in North America close to achieving that?” Mohit thinks for moment, “It’s patchy. Some are close, others aren’t. There’s a way to go, but this recent emergency has energized people to think and to act, and they’re working hard to get the right ecosystem of partners together to deliver that renaissance we’re talking about.”

“Of course, the public sector needs to take risk into account,” adds Robert, “It is, after all, scrutinized to a greater degree than private business and, ultimately, the citizens have the power to vote to change the policies and people involved. We must never forget that.”

7 https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/16/future-government-powers-coronavirus-pandemic/
‘Data is at the core but so is data privacy and security’

“This has to be about pushing data to the edge,” adds Thierry, “It’s about using data to be agile and enabling citizens to self-serve as much as possible.”

“That’s key,” says Keith, “Not just for the delivery of services but the functioning of the entire public sector, at all levels. The seamless flow of data puts the right information into the right hands at the right points in time and space.

So, public sector employees can work from home connected to secure data and engage with citizens via email or text or even social media – as well as on the phone too of course – and suddenly government is digitally dispersed but delivers an efficient, unified service which the citizens just accept without even knowing that the person who’s just solved their problem is sitting at their kitchen table at home.”

“Sure, data is at the core, but so is data privacy and security,” stresses Robert. That’s a vital point. The public good can only be protected if private data is protected. Cyber Security expert, Bruce Schneier from the Harvard Kennedy School, emphasizes that the pandemic has brought issues of privacy in sharp focus because of the necessary emphasis on gathering and sharing public health data. He writes, “As we move toward greater surveillance, we need to figure out how to get the best of both: how to design systems that make use of our data collectively to benefit society as a whole, while at the same time protecting people individually.”

Robert agrees, “Execution is the key to all aspects of digital transformation in any organization, but especially in the public sector. That’s why working with partners who have seen it all and done it means you benefit from their bad experiences as well as their good ones. As I said, public sector leaders are risk-averse because they see what happens in the private sector; Equifax gets hacked, or an airline gets hacked, or even Walmart, and there are bad headlines. But the people can’t vote the CEOs out. They can vote to change who runs their local, regional, or federal government though. That’s what makes this so critical.”
“More and more public sector organizations are getting that everything has changed,” says Keith. “They know that this time everything is different. The public sector will never look the same again.”

Mohit agrees, “There’s generational change in terms of who works for the sector as well as who votes for it. And that shift in generations is having an effect. For instance, some organizations couldn’t cope with the fact that their older workers had left and none of the new ones were well versed on COBOL. That got in the way of modernizing systems as well as keeping them running at a time of crisis.”

“And equally, many of the newer workers don’t understand why they have to commute every day to do what they could do just as well on a laptop at home,” adds Keith. “The experience of sending people home to be safe has revealed that maybe all that expensive real estate with its A/C and heating and car parking and... all the other things... isn’t worth it.”

“The aim for some forward-looking public sector organizations is,” points out Keith, “to get up to 85% of their people working remotely. Think of the efficiencies and savings that could represent.”

“It also helps deliver a more sustainable society,” says Mohit, “You see more when you have the data and the systems powered by technologies like Artificial Intelligence or our quantum inspired computing.

For instance, we worked with a department of education to modernize its legacy systems and discovered that a simple calculation error had been skewing the budget for years! Something that would have taken months to sort out, took just a few minutes.”
“2020 changed everything but it all came at a cost,” stresses Mohit. “We always worked hard to get the most bang for each buck, but now that’s even more important.” It’s a good point: governments had to spend to protect people and their livelihoods, but that doesn’t mean there will be extra funds for modernization and new technologies.

“It’s a balance,” points out Robert, “Judicious allocation of public money focused on delivering digital transformation in adaptive and creative ways.” Mohit quickly adds, “That’s right, it’s actually all about being business driven not technology driven.”

“Optimization is important,” says Thierry, “Do things faster and more often within the framework or limited resources, operating in what I call Twenty-First Century Mode. Getting the right level of investment to achieve the maximum impact always cognizant of limited resources.”

“Which is why AI, automation, and quantum-inspired computing are so important,” says Keith. “And the cloud – the secure cloud configured to suit the specific needs of public sector priorities – is also vital. If you’re going to disperse your workforce, you need to enable data to be accessible securely. And there’ll be much more video conferencing. For years we were told it would happen. It was growing but hadn’t really taken off. The pandemic changed that. Now, we’re all Skyping, Zooming, Webexing, Microsoft... err... Teamsing.”

Everyone laughs. The point is clear. “OK, so we’re agreed, this might be a renaissance, but the money will still be tight,” concludes Mohit.

All agree.

‘It might be a renaissance, but money will still be tight’
‘We never start the conversation with technology’

What’s Fujitsu’s role? Shouldn’t we focus on the technology? These are the questions that got the team shaking their heads.

“It’s never about technology,” says Keith, “It’s about making the most of public money, delivering efficiencies, higher productivity, better ways of working, and, ultimately, a deeper engagement with citizens. Those are business objectives, not technical ones.”

“Fujitsu’s role is to engage with that experience,” says Thierry. “As a partner in an ecosystem, we have the technologies and the alliances to deliver what’s needed. But it’s not a one-size-fits-all package. It’s a process. A human-centric process. We work together to build something better. And we never start with the biggest or most complicated piece of work – we start small, go for quick wins so that you and your people can see the benefits, and build from there.” Robert sums it up, “The public sector sets the agenda. It’s their agenda. What we offer are insights into how they can deliver their goals. How they can do more and do it better for their citizens. We do that through use-cases, examples of our experience and expertise, and by building the ecosystem that suits their specific needs. And then we implement. We make it happen. That’s why we never start the conversation with technology. We start it with what their goals, ambitions, and passions are. It’s the best way to harness the energy of these unique times.”
Are you ready to be bold?
Are you ready to serve?

Public trust has been the key to support for government measures and restrictions during the pandemic emphasizes the Westminster Foundation for Democracy which focuses on an important question: How can political institutions – and the individuals that comprise them – demonstrate their trustworthiness? And how can political institutions, and their supporters, encourage people to become ‘critical citizens’?10

At Fujitsu, we believe you are the key to answering those questions – not with words, but with actions backed by the latest technologies and applications. Digital can support you as you transform the public sector to take it to a new level – a historic level of engagements with citizens’ needs.

We can do it together.
We just need to start.
Talk to us.

10 https://www.wfd.org/2020/05/04/building-political-trust-can-keep-democracies-healthy-during-the-pandemic-and-beyond/