

The Future of Govtech

The average Internet user spends almost seven hours online every day, which equates to two days a week.¹ Meanwhile, the Internet is used by approximately 4.9 billion people, which is more than 60 percent of the global population.² Organizations across the world are jostling to stay in front of these digital users as the Internet steadily gains prominence in the daily lives of people all over the world. As a result, digital transformation has become a top priority for many organizations that seek to provide better experiences and value to their users. However, the government sector has largely remained an exception to this.³

Technology is no longer an isolated industry vertical. Like finance and human resources (HR), it is a horizontal that cuts across industries and sectors. Public sector organizations, which have traditionally lagged in technological adoption across nations, are now being pushed or pulled to catch up. The pull comes from Internet-savvy, globally informed citizens demanding better services benchmarked against the private sector. The push comes from governments' intentions to digitize economies and realize the macrobenefits of productivity. This push and pull of the government sector toward implementing technological solutions for a better future has given rise to the term "government technology (govtech)."

What Is Govtech?

As with most emerging trends, govtech defies a single definition. In fact, the absence of a single definition is perhaps the best indicator of how new the field is and how rapidly its scope is evolving. In general, govtech is technology for the people. Any action that makes the government more technologically functional when interacting with its citizens is govtech. For example, if, through public-private partnership, a practitioner is involved in upgrading a government website and helping the government entity provide better services, that practitioner is engaged in govtech. Another example includes technologically supporting a citizen's suggestion to remove interdepartmental silos from government processes. Regardless of which gets played out more often in the public domain, such ideas could originate both from within or outside the folds of the government. But more important, these

examples can be used to help understand govtech as a dynamic ecosystem where citizens create solutions that can add value to their lives and the government provides the enabling structure, with technology as the catalyst.

As another example, Poland's Prime Minister's Office is currently engaged in govtech initiatives. The office created a dedicated team that aims to bridge the gap between officials and innovators and make government the first investment choice for subject matter experts (SMEs).⁴ This team works to introduce innovations to public life in radically new ways, such as attempting to remove traditional barriers and engaging the developer community in building applications and solutions that serve the public purpose through competitions such as hackathons, open product challenges and start-up pitches. People on this govtech innovation team are selected based on skill sets and ideas rather than budget or market position.

How Govtech Has Become a Buzzword

The technological transformation of the private sector in the last decade or so has created a significant gap between the internal processes of the private and public sectors—and in the consumer experience. Thus, govtech emerged as a response from governments across the globe to address this obvious disconnect by digitizing the user experience.

Government institutions with technological aversions are increasingly facing disgruntled citizens, especially in sectors such as telecommunications, where government entities are competing against private organizations for services even as basic as setting up new phone connections and high-speed Internet to households and providing responsive customer service. Failure to keep up with changing and trending technologies eventually creates budget deficits for

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government institutions. This pushes other public entities, even monopoly service providers, to adopt technology more actively.

The benefits of governments embracing technology include:

- Transparency and digital recordings of all operations, leading to exhaustive controls and streamlined government processes
- Reduction in time, cost and effort, internally for government employees and externally for citizens
- A positive and pleasant experience for citizens and other users, changing the perception of the public sector in the minds of the people

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Viewing governments' willingness to adopt govtech as an opportunity, various private organizations have created solutions to help bridge the gap. For example, Amazon launched the AWS GovTechStart program in January 2021 to financially assist organizations with bringing innovative ideas to fruition that will improve public sector services in the United States.⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic has further pushed governments to not only adopt but also embrace the latest technologies, enabling process optimization and noncontact touch points. The pandemic is causing governments to implement in months changes that would have otherwise taken years, such as changing procurement practices to enable faster supply gain⁶ and adopting principles to enable telemedicine.⁷

Govtech Global Partnership

As more information is digitized, governments around the world are pushing to close the digital gap so they

can provide effective services that meet the needs and expectations of their citizens. The examples of Estonia⁸ and Singapore⁹ are relatively old, well known and highly regarded. In Albania, the Agency for Delivery of Integrated Services in Albania (ADISA) is using govtech to address service delivery challenges through interoperability and service automation enhancing convenience with functionality that includes one-stop service shops, improving online delivery of services, increasing service information and developing mechanisms for citizen feedback.¹⁰

In another example of govtech, the Public Administration Modernization Project in Djibouti is enabling access to egovernment and service access points, developing a digital platform and eservices, and establishing a citizen service center.¹¹

The transformations in Estonia and Singapore were more sweeping and governmentwide. Meanwhile, the project in Djibouti was more selective and focused on improving the efficiency of select revenue services, and Albania's objective was to enhance access to and delivery of a defined set of services. However, the central theme in all these instances is the evolution of egovernment and the efforts by governments to improve access and experience for citizens to its services, powered by technology.

In the same vein, such efforts of nations are now also being supplemented by the endeavors of multilateral agencies. To enable the public sector to keep up and make the most of technology, the World Bank's Governance Global Practice (GGP)¹² launched the GovTech Global Partnership (GTGP)¹³ in late 2019. The World Bank Group hopes to strengthen digital governance and bring together relevant and significant stakeholders to promote the use of foundational, emerging and disruptive digital technologies in transforming the way governments deliver services to and engage with citizens and businesses. A collaborative effort spanning the digital governance landscape, this initiative brings together governments, start-ups, multinational technology enterprises, freelance experts, development partners, academia, civil society and other entities that are a part of the govtech space. This partnership supports beneficiary countries through a wide range of activities such as advancing and sharing knowledge and best practices, providing capacity-building and knowledge-exchange programs, offering technical advisory to member countries, and helping them pilot solutions.

In Guatemala, the GGP funded a project led by the Presidential Commission for Open and Electronic Government to help identify govtech opportunities, create a national digital strategy along with recommendations for govtech policies, deliver critical government services during the pandemic and nurture a culture of innovation to promote effective and efficient digital services.¹⁴ Another example of a govtech project is funded by the GGP in Mongolia, where the Communications and Information Technology Authority (CITA) is trying to promote a human-centric approach for digital public service design to ensure that marginalized societies have universal access to such services.¹⁵

There are many such examples. But the main point is that technology is now helping governments and citizens to connect in more impactful ways throughout the world, spanning across developed nations to emerging economies, from Estonia and Singapore to Djibouti and Mongolia. The impact is far reaching and not just in terms of geographical boundaries or business process enhancements. There is a much more deep-rooted and fundamental transformation taking place, including better access to egovernment, more efficient government service delivery, enhanced citizen experiences, modernization of legacy systems, increased access to public services for underserved populations, improvement of digital skills of government workforces, evolved engagement with the private sector, reinforced need for innovation, positive cultural shifts in government entities, more progressive policy frameworks and an overall better readiness for a digital future.

Implementation Considerations

As govtech emerges, its governance has become a concern. More specifically, most concerns revolve around managing data. For a government, questions arise about who owns the data, who reports to whom, sharing data across silos, security, privacy and data integrity. For a citizen, there is uncertainty about who owns, manages, controls and has access to certain technologies that deal with their data. These concerns present unique challenges for governments trying to use technologies to enhance service delivery to their citizens.

The data privacy and security issues the world is facing are largely due to policies and regulations not having caught up with the reality that new technologies have created. When new technologies



are deployed, the consequences extend well beyond the realm of the technology itself. To use the oft-repeated example, when a self-driving vehicle hits someone, who should be held responsible? Many questions and ethical considerations come to the forefront during the implementation of such technologies. Therefore, governments must partner with technology enterprises, policy experts and thought leaders to delve deeper into such considerations, experiment with ideas and outcomes, and develop suitable regulations to govern and mitigate risk. At the end of the day, it is not just about technological advancements or govtech; it is about creating social value that can not only sustain current human expectations, but also nurture the aspirations of future generations.

Conclusion

Fundamentally, a government represents the society it intends to serve. So, it is critical that government entities reflect the world as it evolves. Be it through a reactive pull or a proactive push, it is incumbent upon public organizations to keep the gap between technology and service capability as minimal and nondisruptive as possible. Govtech can be an enabler

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for this objective. For instance, for a govtech program, the outcome is not the successful launch of a mobile app and website, it is that the solution now provides 24/7 digital access to a multitude of public services for a set of the population that only had time-limited physical access to such services through a service center. However, to obtain such optimum outputs, it is imperative that there is not only high-level leadership commitment to drive govtech reforms, but also that this commitment is supplemented by a long-term vision that addresses financial support, flexible procurement and road-mapped outcomes, the latter being appropriately informed by e-government maturity and readiness levels.

The importance of prioritizing change management cannot be stressed enough wherein adequate incentives need to be created to motivate the workforce and reduce institutional resistance. At the same time, govtech projects should preferably be monitored through select and limited indicators and be strongly focused on results to avoid bloat and complexity that can be characteristic of many governmental reforms. Concurrently, as the world moves rapidly forward in this digital era, the design of govtech initiatives should take into consideration country-specific constraints of access and literacy to ensure inclusivity and avoid the risk of distending extant divides.

Lastly, practitioners must note that partnerships and alliances can make or break govtech initiatives. Effective collaborations with academia, think tanks, industry associations, incubators, start-ups and the larger private sector can augment the impact of such initiatives and investments manifold, and all stakeholders should actively look toward creating mechanisms and opportunities for such joint efforts. As long as this happens, governments will be able to change the perception that citizens have about public-sector organizations.

Endnotes

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