

Accountability for Digital Dreamers: Patterns of Failed Digitalization Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

To contribute to digitalization and accountability research, this study adopted a pattern arising from failure due to weak accountability that was initially identified in Great Britain. This was done to investigate if the pattern reappeared in digitalization initiatives at the Swedish municipal level. Attempting to answer this, the present study structured a survey sent to every municipality in Sweden, resulting in a response rate of 40.4%. It was not possible to statistically claim that the pattern repeated itself in the chosen context, making this study's main contribution to stress that there might be a pattern as an effect due to weak accountability, without any knowledge of how this pattern presents itself.

KEYWORDS

Accountability, Digitalization Initiatives, E-Government, Public Sector, Sweden

INTRODUCTION

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Digitalization initiatives are being implemented worldwide to various extents in pursuit of the value they can bring (Winkler & Zinsmeister, 2019). Digitalization is driven by the emergence of new digital technologies, the aim of which is increased efficiency (Bloomberg, 2018). However, the downside of the potential value is excessive cost and a substantial risk of failure (Orji, 2019; Wade & Shan, 2018). According to the International Data Corporation (IDC), Europe is estimated to spend \$1.2 trillion in 2022 on digitalization, with 13% coming from the public sector (IDC, 2022) a fail rate of 87% (Wade & Shan, 2018). A failed digitalization initiative implies a range of problems such as a failure in adherence to the budget or schedule or missed targeted value goals (Almarabeh & Abu Ali, 2010; Anthopoulos et al, 2016; Sundberg, 2019). To combat this, scholars have worked for decades to identify critical success factors (Poon & Wagner, 2001; Zahedi, 1987)—processes that must function and be implemented well to ensure digital success, and which vary between initiatives depending on existing conditions (Winkler & Zinsmeister, 2019).

One critical success factor that has been identified is having a supportive management team that is held accountable (Gunawong & Gao, 2017). According to Gunawong and Gao (2017), this team creates a driving force, ensuring that the values the initiative pursues are realized (Burga & Rezania,

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2017). Scholars have reached a similar conclusion, (see, e.g., Agostino et al., 2022) and argue that accountability represents an indispensable factor in fostering organizational success.

Accountability, which this work will take a closer look at, is an important aspect for private as well as public organizations to function, and is not limited to the digital domain. Agostino et al. (2022) stress that responsibility is required as an account of actions and decisions within organizations, which means that while management has the authority to direct business, it also has the corresponding responsibility to account for the result during the same period. Ossege (2012) further argues that accountability should be a central part of the public sector and that it is a decisive factor in improving and controlling resource efficiency and contributing to legitimate public administration. The difference between the public and private sector contexts regarding digital initiatives, researchers have pointed out the importance of distinguishing the two (Bozeman & Bretschneider, 1986; Bretschneider, 1990; Rocheleau & Wu, 2002).

Highlighting that one of the main differences is accountability, digital initiatives in the public sector are tax-funded and should be transparent and subject to the scrutiny of political decisions (Bozeman & Bretschneider, 1986). Despite previous research emphasizing the importance of maintaining accountability, Guerin et al. (2018) have identified a recurring pattern arising from weak accountability in the United Kingdom. The pattern was established on a review of documentation produced by several government institutes and concerns public officials from the municipal sector to elected members of parliament (Guerin et al, 2018). This raises the question of whether the pattern can only be found where it was initially identified or exists in other geographical areas. This work will position itself in a digital environment at the Swedish municipal level and further examine whether the pattern Guerin et al. (2018) have identified in the UK is repeated in this context. The chosen context is important because, in democratic governments, legitimacy is built upon the citizens' trust in their representatives and governmental administrators. And this trust requires both transparency and accountability to be sustained (Harrison & Sayogo, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to explore mechanisms of accountability in digitalization initiatives by reproducing a study conducted by Guerin et al. (2018) in a Swedish setting on the municipal level. Given that municipal resources are predominantly tax-funded, transparency and legitimacy are crucial to secure public support for digitalization initiatives (Hood & Heald, 2006). Therefore, this study aims to determine whether the pattern identified as the cause of failure—the weak accountability found in the UK—is evident in digitalization initiatives in Swedish municipalities as well. To accomplish this, the study asked direct questions about the pattern dimensions to investigate if, and to what extent, the respondents have experienced the different dimensions. Furthermore, the study aims to provide novel insights into accountability by delving into specific components of the pattern.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

Johnston (2006) stated that an issue with governance, good or bad, is that it is undertaken even though the policy may have no consensus. Johnston (2006) also argues that good governance is requisite for cooperation between government and citizens. To this end, accountability and transparency are key factors needed to obtain legitimacy in the pursuit of accepted social goals. According to Johnston (2006), accountability requires transparency and vice versa; transparency allows the citizens to see what is being accomplished, who is involved, and how it contributes to creating value for them, whereas accountability puts pressure on officials, forcing them to demonstrate that they have followed established rules and procedures (Johnston, 2006). Haque (2000) pointed out that accountability in public governance “has been a major concern in all societies and civilizations” (Haque, 2000, p. 599). He stresses that accountability is not limited to governance ideology type, even though it differs depending on culture, principles, and ideological inclination, and further argues that the existence of media scrutiny, legislative committee, and parliamentary debate are crucial features that are required to ensure accountability. Good accountability in democratic governments can be seen as “the

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