

Just How Smart are Smart Cities?



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It's Time for Digital Government to Ask Citizens

As we enter the digital age, 'smart cities' provide a glimpse of the future, but a big gap between the hype and the reality remains¹. Many smart city initiatives apply technology-driven solutions to yesterday's problems and fail to re-create systems and services designed with their digital citizens in mind. We believe city and digital government leaders must demonstrate clear value, tangible outcomes and engaging experiences for their citizens, businesses and visitors – delivering public service for the future. The reality is that voters (and mayors) only care about outcomes – more efficient transport systems; reduced water and energy bills; more livable buildings – not the technology that makes it possible.

It's time for cities to take the reins from the technology industry and lead the next generation of smart city initiatives from an outcome perspective that is centered on the citizen.

Rebuilding city hall for the digital age

Early adopters rarely grasp how things might work in the future and often use new technology to speed up existing processes, instead of creating new ways of doing things. For example, the advent of word processing software was first seen as a tool to speed up office typing pools as opposed to replacing them entirely. Today, smart city initiatives are often doing the same thing, thinking in evolutionary instead of revolutionary terms. Few have grappled with the kind of radical re-invention necessary to find new ways of running a city and providing value to citizens.

Where cities have started to do this, the results are impressive, reaching across old silos to drive mission productivity for the whole organization. New York City's DataBridge program², for example, integrated city data from a vast array of sources into a single analytical platform. Looking at data from multiple angles is leading to more insight-driven operations and delivering improvements across city departments. One has been a five-fold increase in the inspection 'hit rate' of New York buildings so dangerous that they must be vacated, boosting return on investment, and making the city safer.

Yokohama Smart City is another example of joined up thinking, in the city's ongoing efforts to cut CO2 emissions, while

boosting economic growth in the city. It is seeking to rethink how the city deals with energy use in a wide range of contexts, from people's individual homes and cars, through to the wider community, bringing together a range of city functions.

This integrated approach rarely happens on its own: it requires new governance structures such as a dedicated executive to own and drive strategy. While some cities are setting up smart city boards to guide strategy, there is still a clear need to grapple with execution. To do so, leading cities such as Amsterdam, San Francisco and Singapore have appointed cross-cutting CIO or CTO roles to turn strategy into reality.

From portal to person – digital government from the citizen's perspective

One of the strengths of the approach taken by cities like San Francisco is the focus on citizens and local businesses: in creating a new leadership role to deliver on digital government innovation, the city has expressly sought to be "transparent, efficient and constituent-focused". This matters. Take the city of Songdo in South Korea: its systems work very well, but far fewer people are moving in than expected. People want outcomes, enjoyable experiences and more personalized services. This is what wins hearts and minds—and votes.

Rio de Janeiro's 1-Rio contact service³ provides a powerful example of what a human-centered approach can accomplish. To simplify citizen interaction, the city provided a single phone number to handle all municipal requests, combined with a review of how to improve responses to such contacts. The scheme has been a great success, with average response time to critical requests dropping from 35 to five hours. Just as importantly, analysis of incoming calls has helped the city better identify issues of importance and act accordingly. Take street lighting, for example, where complaints dropped by over half after data helped identify areas that required action before the lights actually failed.

Smart cities must start with the citizens' needs, not the technology, and build new services through human-centered design. But this is just the start of the potential benefits of leaving behind old ways of thinking.

Is your city the next big digital entrepreneur?

New markets and services grew around the port cities of the industrial age, adding value to the flow of goods and driving the dynamism of the entire city. As cities reinvent themselves, urban governments must understand that data represents the raw materials of the digital age. By embracing a mindset of public entrepreneurship city leaders can open up their data and create new marketplaces for private, proprietary data that relates to the city, to foster innovation, improve services and boost their economies.

Progress is being made, but more needs to be done. Cities must focus on the quality, not just quantity of data available, for example less than 10% of government data sets are published as full open data⁴. They must also shift from a 'supply-driven' approach of releasing available data to a 'demand driven' one based on valued citizen use cases. Copenhagen's Big Data Infrastructure (BDI) project is moving in this direction by creating a common data platform to pool and share both public and private sector information.

This project seeks to define the 'killer use cases' for urban information, a viable technical architecture, a self-sustaining business model and the most appropriate governance model. Part of a wider "Cities for People" initiative, one of the core goals is to create a more open marketplace for data, to help both the city and local businesses realize the value of their information, enabling the city to deliver better services more efficiently. Just as importantly, Copenhagen hopes to foster innovation and entrepreneurship, bolstering the city's economy and supply of good jobs.

If our cities are to meet the challenges of tomorrow, the smart city agenda needs an overhaul. Better technology to support business as usual isn't enough. By focusing on the citizen and real outcomes, city leaders can reinvent their institutions, improve services and build the infrastructure of the digital age – delivering public service for the future. Urban areas that fail to make the transition will be, like the typing pool, abandoned; but those that embrace a human-centered approach to their digital government strategy will thrive in the information era.

Sources

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