

Innovating the Public Sector: from Ideas to Impact



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The Innovation Imperative: A Call to Action

#ideas2impact



THE INNOVATION IMPERATIVE: A CALL TO ACTION¹

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Driving Public Sector Innovation

Governments today are confronted by an unprecedented pace of technological, demographic and social change, combined with increasingly complex policy challenges. Innovative approaches are needed to respond to these challenges, yet governments' impetus to sustain innovation has been inconsistent. Governments have always had their share of innovators: people who care passionately about serving citizens, finding new solutions, and doing things better, more efficiently and in new ways. Today, however, a call for action is urgently needed to transform the public sector as a whole into a place that welcomes innovation and is itself more innovative.

Public sector organisations are at a crossroads. Increasingly, policy making and service delivery involves a number of actors with varied interests, values and demands and who play roles that in the past only governments played. The internet and mobile communications are revolutionising how public servants carry out their work and how citizens interact with their governments. The changing composition of society is further amplifying citizens' expectations and service demands with calls for more responsive and more customised services intensifying as a result. Citizens also expect their governments to live within their means, to be increasingly open and transparent, and to make available relevant information.

Governments cannot meet these expectations by doing less, but most governments can no longer afford to do more of the same. More importantly, they are discovering that many traditional prescriptions have not been sufficient or effective, and that new, more agile and innovative solutions are needed. Failure to deliver risks a loss of trust and legitimacy. In order to keep pace with their changing environment, governments need to take immediate and bold action to catalyse the critical elements that support public sector innovation.

Key Actions for Government

Meeting the innovation challenge requires taking a systemic approach – focusing on the people involved, the information they are using, the ways in which they are working together, as well as the rules and processes which govern their work. Governments are called upon to urgently address these four areas to promote and enable public sector innovation.

¹ The call to action of the Innovation Imperative presented in this document draws from initial evidence emerging from the OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation database and research [see the conference background document "Building Organisational Capacity for Public Sector Innovation"]. The Innovation Imperative will be refined in subsequent steps to reflect input by governments in OECD member countries and other key stakeholders after the Conference.

ACTION 1: People Matter

Governments must invest in the capacity and capabilities of civil servants as the catalysts of innovation. This includes building the culture, incentives and norms to facilitate new ways of working.

No government can build a strong and secure country without a professional, capable and innovative civil service. As demands on the public sector and corresponding resources continue to move in opposing directions, an innovative public service will be increasingly vital to ensuring both domestic and global success. Given the far-reaching impact of the public sector, all governments have a stake in ensuring that their public services are equipped with the skills, incentives and scope for smart risk taking and problem solving to spur innovation and drive better outcomes for citizens.

ACTION 2: Knowledge is power

Governments must facilitate the free flow of information, data and knowledge across the public sector and use it to respond creatively to new challenges and opportunities.

The information, data and knowledge that inform strategic and operational decision making are critical to fuelling public sector innovation. Harnessing the innovative potential of information requires that information be open and available, and that organisations carefully consider what information is required and how best to systematically integrate it into the decision making process to support continuous learning. Organisations who fail to learn risk incurring higher costs and repeating their errors, while failing to realise new possibilities.

ACTION 3: Working together solves problems

Governments must advance new organisational structures and leverage partnerships to enhance approaches and tools, share risk and harness available information and resources for innovation.

The complex problems faced by governments today require new ways of working. These include approaches based on collaboration and partnership which integrate the vital perspectives of citizens, civil society, academia and business, as well as exchange within the public sector. Creating more open, networked, and horizontal organisations, adept at collaboration inside and outside government are required. So too are more flexible approaches to working, including pooling talent and creating multidisciplinary management teams to strengthen collaboration. Temporary teams, pilot projects and short-term assignments are all ways for governments to experiment and better align talent and resources to encourage dialogue, experimentation, risk-taking, problem-solving and innovation.

ACTION 4: Rules and processes to support, not hinder

Government must ensure that internal rules and processes are balanced in their capacity to mitigate risks while protecting resources and enabling innovation.

While internal controls, rules and processes are required to ensure sound stewardship and accountability, they can inadvertently stifle innovation. To guard against this, governments must ensure that their public services are marked by reasonable rules and lean processes. Such efforts should ensure that the accountability regime is both robust and easy to navigate while also more systematically focused on enabling innovation. New outcome-focused approaches to project management are one step in moving away from the rigidities of a command-and-control model.