



By **Harley Dennett**
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Transformation agency caution: 'digital lipstick won't work'



Feedback has been overwhelmingly enthusiastic about a new digital "start-up" inside the Canberra bureaucracy exploring innovative uses of data and bringing quality control to online service delivery. But it comes with a note of caution from public sector technology advisors that digital transformation is more than just ICT and must go beyond cosmetic front-end development.

More details have been released about the Digital Transformation Office, the new Department of Communications unit [announced by the Abbott government on Friday](#). A "small team of developers, designers, researchers and content specialists" will drive the existing [myGov](#) digital platform and other projects focusing on "end-user needs in developing digital services".

Only one name has been attached to the DTO so far — Pia Waugh revealed her involvement on Twitter but little more until administrative details were settled.



A recruitment process for senior roles in the new agency — including a chief executive — will begin shortly, looking for digital transformation experts regardless of whether they cut their teeth in the public or private sector. Whoever fills those roles will quickly get to know all of government's service arms as it takes on a central agency-like position, assuming responsibility for leading all government ICT investment decisions relating to "citizen-focused digital service delivery", as well as acting as "digital champion" and educator for agencies with limited digital expertise.

Australian government chief technology officer John Sheridan deflected questions about his ongoing role today, with a spokesperson from the Department of Finance saying the details are yet to be finalised.

The machinery of government change involves no additional funds, with DTO to be financed entirely within existing Department of Communications resources.

A spokesman for Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull told *The Mandarin* there are synergies in the Department of Communications between the digital-by-default ethos and practice that the public have come to expect — seamless interaction with government:

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"This agency isn't designed to operate in a silo. Some agencies do things already incredibly well ... others have made very little progress. The point behind this agency is that it'll be the first time that we will have that whole-of-government perspective.

"You won't see dribs and drabs of good stuff and quite a lot of bad. You will see, hopefully, a level playing field of very good performance."

Turnbull (pictured) said on Friday the unit will "operate more like a start-up" than a traditional government agency.

One of the primary tasks will be to develop a unitary log-in for government services, while protecting privacy and security of digital identities. The myGov log-in process — which won the Silver and Collaboration Award at the Excellence in Public Service Management awards last year — will be expanded. According to Turnbull's office:

"That identity assurance space is probably the most significant issue governments around the world are grappling with in the digital space. Are you who you say you are? And therefore once we've determined that you are who you say you are, we're providing a seamless log-in process where that can be duplicated across agencies as opposed to having to do that countless times."

The government's vision includes a consistent "look and feel" that meets the needs and expectations of the user, fewer roadblocks, and digital from start to finish. Turnbull will also direct the new agency to look at all possible advances in digital service delivery across government. According to the spokesperson:

"The classic example is going to be how we utilise data. Obviously there's been quite a bit push in the open data space already, so how have we leveraged that data, and how have we leveraged analytics to improve the services we deliver?"

Trials of more open data uses will be announced later this year.

A takeover of government ICT?

So is this a complete takeover of ICT? Not according to a spokesperson at the Department of Communications:

"Government agencies will retain responsibility for ICT investment decisions that do not relate to citizen-focused digital service delivery."

But the team at the Department of Finance currently responsible for the whole-of-government ICT perspective don't yet know what remaining role they will have outside procurement. Nor do the team behind myGov at the Department of Human Services know their ongoing involvement with the project. However, DTO will be responsible for resolving disputes about investment and platforms, [says advice from Turnbull's office](#).

Human Services developed myGov for Centrelink, Medicare and other welfare transactions, but it now includes the Australian Taxation Office's online system. The department had begun engaging other agencies on expanding the service.

Human Services senior executive Ben Rimmer was a significant driver of the project before he departed earlier this month for a post as CEO of the City of Melbourne.

Former Human Services chief technology architect Marie Johnson says the task at hand is not about digital front end, "in the way that the online and e-gov initiatives of the past decades left the client in a cluttered nest of process between and across agencies".

Johnson and UK government technology advisor Dr Jerry Fishenden [presented a paper late last year](#) on the digital disruption of government, which advocated for a commission of transformation, like the DTO. They criticised the lack of digital literacy in government agencies such as the Public Service Commission for failing to even mention the word digital in APS-wide leadership strategies.

The single determinant of the unit's success will be the client experience, [Johnson blogged today](#):

"The focus must be on transformation — not 'digital' — and that means some inconvenient truths will need to be faced about accountability and old structures that are not needed.

"The challenge at hand will require a profound understanding of the machinery of government — it is in every respect a complex system, and systems thinking is required. Knowing the lever points that can change the system — as well as the fossilised structures — avoiding years of effort putting digital lipstick on the front end but which doesn't change things."

Open data advocate, GovHack national organiser and Link Digital executive director Steven De Costa told *The Mandarin* there is still room for improvement in the public data space as well.

"We need to raise the awareness of bureaucrats how to do good data management, how to create good data, how to design programs that enable iterative program management to improve the quality of the programs being undertaken."

The UK government's Mike Bracken, executive director of Digital in the Cabinet Office and head of the D5 summit he hosted in London last December. The Australian team joins others in Mexico, Brazil, the USA, Estonia, Singapore, South Korea and New Zealand — together, we're building an amazing community of knowledge and experience. The pace of momentum is striking."

More at *The Mandarin*: [Tale of two countries: the digital disruption of government](#)



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Harley Dennett is editor at *The Mandarin* based in Canberra. He's held communications roles in the New South Wales public sector and Defence, and been a staff reporter for newspapers in Sydney and Washington DC.

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