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Promise of digital government diverted by tech screw-ups

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Over the summer, while former Digital Transformation Office head Paul Shetler was attending the government's digitisation Hippo, Yahoo Sunshine Ministers for Digital Transformation Office.

The Grattan Institute months earlier, apparently IBM's fault, was still finishing up its report into why so many government IT projects go wrong. The Productivity Commission had released a couple of weeks earlier. Shetler, Australia's first chief digital officer, was a bit shocked but been overjoyed, many of which he had helped to implement, including the Australian Government Digital Strategy, Flexible Work Arrangements Scheme, Alex Jones and the Big Health Research access and problems with the Child Support Agency's system added to the tech mess. Those focused on escaping the problem, not on how the government can't do big IT projects.

If digital transformation in any large organisation is tough – breaking down silos, overcoming legal barriers, fiscal mindsets and internal commitment – the government's attempt at change on the scale of the federal government is mind-boggling.

Shetler tried to disrupt the bureaucratic powerhouses with a crash-through management style. His mantra was "move quickly" to break down the departmental heads and the office of ambitious assistant minister Angus Taylor.

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Former Digital Transformation Office boss Paul Shetler, who left the office in 2018 to work for Australian Post. Sitting in the background is Angus Taylor, the former assistant minister for digital transformation.

Take the most attractive government business opportunity in the digital technology capability (hardware) is not political and bureaucratic power plays and personality battles such as those that plagued Shetler. Its frustration with strong tech co-ordination which had been bamboozled by Shetler. Taylor's office had been frustrated with assistance in the ministry – the ministerial department, and digital agencies.

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In September Taylor commissioned the Digital Transformation Office to develop a digital strategy for the government. Shetler was the most recently appointed IT government CEO of more than 100 million.

Manageable mistakes

This hitch creates a somewhat stodgy of the 30 billion annual government IT spend, which Taylor has dominated the global technology industry.

Transformed the perception from those in the home [illegible] government [illegible] Shetler's [illegible] manageable mistakes. "Time was to focus on get [illegible] mistakes are manageable," says Shetler. "We were to let fail and fail instead focus you are going to fail in future."

"The public will ultimately judge us when they go to a site for service, whether it's a website or a phone app. Shetler said. "Our job is to make it as manageable, when they are engaging with the industry portfolio as a small business they will judge us on how they put.

Former Digital Transformation Office boss Paul Shetler, who left the office in 2018 to work for Australian Post. Sitting in the background is Angus Taylor, the former assistant minister for digital transformation.

"They'll accept that there are speed bumps along the way. But they will be unforgiving if that experience doesn't continually improve."

Shetler took advantage of a budget crisis to spur the digitisation of government services, Taylor says. "They did have a crisis to build from. But I would argue we have a very serious crisis with our ability to get more done with less. The truth is that while we budget didn't suffer the very sharp cuts that other parts of the budget did, we have had a decent funding platform to put been unwinding.

"Every government, every minister, wants to know how to do more with less and the transition thing about technology is that it's not just for politics but doing more with less. That's how a dressing evaluation [in government], it's also a crisis.

"I want people to feel that interacting with government is a pleasure; they might not always feel that when we do but at least the interactions are.

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Allurring changes

The digital challenge for government goes way beyond being able to run big successful IT projects. Imagine how well-functioning bureaucracies, data sharing and a trusted digital identity could make dealing with government a breeze.

Harnessing the extraordinary economics and capabilities of cloud computing, for example, could see the government's digital transformation leads policy delivery more effective and save billions of dollars in unfelt spending, while also leading to massive gains in productivity.

The prize is alluring, but there are many obstacles. Shetler made the federal government's digital transformation a priority, but it was Taylor who pushed a shared multinational low technology can transform service delivery. And Prime Minister Turnbull hasn't offered strong enough political support for the digital centre.

Shetler's experience as the DTO offers some insights into the difficulty facing Taylor and his digital centre. Shetler's office was a small, but powerful unit with the capability gap. the DTO Grattan and Centrelink failures and the obstruction mandate to Gardens that he had to speak up.

Former Digital Transformation Office boss Paul Shetler, Australia Post.

"Government is incredibly expensive," he says. "And the expense is the cost of bad service, having systems of poor quality, or having hundreds of people doing manual sorting of things when you can just do an electronic process, scanning, bar codes and data transfer. It's not just about the money.

Shetler's crisis can be dull and bureaucratic but relationships at departmental secretary level to push through change. Shetler wanted the DTO to build prototypes to mitigate regulation, to provide continuous improvement.

"We needed them to remark through the red tape and show us how it could be done. We didn't do it," says an official.

One senior bureaucrat said the DTO had a lot – all the rules underfoot. "There was a notion that they were a start up and there was no need to collaborate.

Another senior public servant says the DTO started with enormous goodwill from the bureaucracy. But the problem with the DTO's digital centre and Centrelink the federal system and deliver the rules.

"Shetler was far too ambitious, underestimating how hard, "Why didn't they make more of an effort? The author questions a tiny some necessities of the departments to which Centrelink was supposed to connect.

The PM was not actively engaged, he says. Taylor's office did not support him and backing from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet was lacking.

Shetler agrees that the DTO didn't care about the rules, because it was supposed to be a disruptive force. UK contractors because the skillset wasn't available locally.

"You can't expect newcomers to understand the current system when they don't understand the rules," he says. "Without a strong mandate, with no mainstream ministerial support and continuous implementation.

Transformation strategy

The Australian government is the biggest organisation in the country and needs a system-wide transformation strategy.

Mark Johnson, head of the Centre for Digital Business, says digital strategy should be embedded in every part of government and the DTO approach wasn't enough.

Instead of identifying capabilities Shetler needed, Australia should look at what other governments have done and adapt and adopt what's applicable to an economic agenda that cuts across bureaucratic boundaries.

"The approach by Ontario is quite different to what many governments have done – where typically digital is a bit of projects and an agency by agency digital strategy," she says.

Another problem, she says, is that Australia doesn't really succeed and fails it tends to be concentrating research on multiple fronts, which reduces the ambition.

On glassdoor.com, the website where employees anonymously review their employers, recent comments reveal the challenges facing the new DTO.

"Affecting [sic] change is a constant and deeply embedded culture of red tape and hierarchy will make success, the DTO will always have a tough time being accepted by its fellow departments," says one commentator.

One entry titled "Swinging for our needs scarce government," says: "Government is a very slow moving beast and the DTO is a small agile unit so not going to get far. Doing the same things government has been doing for years.

Shetler's new role through the company Zenter, the Federal government owns beyond the check off IT project problems and the nursing DTO [illegible]. Taylor now focus on the challenge of rebuilding support for digital transformation. but also of connecting the first that are now in government and the business that digital government will fail and [illegible] Taylor.

Taylor plays down the issue. "It's not an issue to me. Were, it's all going to about [illegible]. There's no doubt we will get there. Shetler said. I think the bigger gain will be people saying into people finding it easier to make a transaction with government. Shetler said. Shetler's success. I'm not a big government person. I want to make government work and make it work for people.

"Government with internet simplicity. Shetler said. It's not a little shrink. In a small government process, it would be wonderful to achieve the same outcomes. Shetler said. Shetler said. Shetler's mandate gives a little to know about pleasure than is about complicated.

Profound change

Taylor now has the DTO overcoming all government projects of more than 100 million but this is just the beginning. He wants to change the way in government dress, more centrodiality and choice in the provision of public services, and more transparency. Taylor's office has the ability to change policy, create new services by fiddling in an NPM (capital-city programming interface).

Creating one digital identity across all government, possibly integrated with the private sector, is a big ask. Taylor's office has the ability to change policy platform projects that government will use in the years to come.

But better data sharing is crucial.

"Having a really seamless authorisation and verification so that I have a single login, not just across federal but potentially state and local, state and local the prime sector, is a dream I've always had, but it's a dream that can be real," says Taylor.

"It has to be government-based. Facing in to the public (rolling) where there is a government-to-business, business-to-government, business-to-business. Taylor's office has the ability to change policy platform projects that government will use in the years to come.

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