

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND HARNESSING INNOVATION THROUGH **GOVERNMENT SERVICES** IN THE CARIBBEAN

By Kristie Powell, Digital Transformation Expert, Public and Private Sector.

We know that governments in the Caribbean are well-versed in introducing new industries and creating opportunities. Tourism and financial services are proof. However, for too long technology has been someone else's problem. An area that policymakers shy away from, don't think about or don't fully understand. It's time to redefine how we want to work in a space that's affecting everything. The average Bahamian citizen spends approximately 25 days per year doing business with the government. We found that a well-defined digital agenda will support the government's thrust for transparency and accountability.

We had the opportunity to increase the use of online government services by the public and private sectors. For example, the average time for a citizen to obtain a renewal of a passport was 3 days. However, when the decision was made to introduce an interoperability platform to link agencies, the average time decreased from 3 days to 4 hours. We were not simply moving a government online, but building an online government. This took foresight, disruption, and innovation.

The interoperability platform took a citizen-first approach. We provided a single window for citizens to make inquiries, requests, and transact business like the renewal of a passport. The platform allowed for transporting data securely between the relevant agencies and the citizens in an era where our digital footprint must be safeguarded. We improved

customer service by introducing a concept enshrined in legislation that once a government agency has the information, no other agency should ask for the same data. We allowed for other agencies to verify data from the other without requiring the citizen to be physically present or provide a physical copy. No longer did a citizen have to take time off from work, travel from agency to agency, and receive notarized copies. This initiative increased transparency and strengthened audit and control mechanisms within the government.



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The interoperability platform unveiled the Government's open data strategy. Having a strategy allows for connecting with citizens in a new way. Open data provides new opportunities for entrepreneurs, improves product release times, and can build the foundation for new technology innovation. Companies in the private sector were able to securely connect to the government's backbone, process payment transactions for services, and securely update government systems in real-time. This had enormous economic benefits within the FinTech space where companies can take advantage of these interfaces to develop new applications and services.

Interaction with each government agency differed. It took an understanding of standard operating procedures and workflows to ensure procedural digitization is compliant with governing practices from a policy and legal perspective. We found that in some instances procedures and/or policies needed

to be re-engineered or made redundant to accomplish digitization. For example, in some agencies officers implemented policies to ask for certified copies of documents that were not required by law. The lack of transparency results in distrust amongst the agencies and deepens the sense of insecurity. The interoperability platform allayed this concern of the public servant. This speaks to the importance that governments need to give to the design and management of public policies to support digital transformation.

Undoubtedly, there are several barriers that make adopting any new technology in the public sector slow, painful or unattempted. One of the biggest of these barriers is the legacy systems that are already in place. In the public sector in the Caribbean, there are many organizations reliant on outdated technology stacks. When embarking on a modernization effort, the complexity comes in determining what information should be migrated? How should the data be extracted? Do I have the right people on the team to take on this effort?

Often nonresident consultants are used in the Caribbean for modernization efforts. However, when you invest in your own people you spur economic development. The cost becomes more manageable for the government and the administration reaffirms their commitments to building talent. We truly believe that the success of the interoperability platform project is a direct result of building institutional capacity and knowledge within the government, through the creation of a team of technologists, legal specialists, and financial buffs to support the fledgling digital ecosystem. The team discerned that we had to invest in our people and provide the proper training or re-skilling opportunities such that no one is left behind, displaced, or at risk of being furloughed. Being human and proceeding with empathy, governments can ensure that the results of technology adoption are productive. Our experience in the Bahamas can be instructive for other governments in the Caribbean region.

If we look closely at our ministries and agencies and discover problems, then force ourselves to think

creatively, to find ways to increase government revenues and lower government expenditures through technology. Digital transformation is a journey; a process that does not happen overnight. It happens as we adopt new systems, learn new ways of doing business, and evolve.

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Interoperability systems deliver the flexibility, security, and affordability that governments need to improve both the citizens and their budgets. The digital transformation effort was less about technology and more about our people. Governments that harness innovation and foster an entrepreneurial mindset as the engine for economic growth and the catalyst for productivity are more likely to pull out and stay ahead of any economic hurdle and create jobs in the process. When this type of thinking occurs, we change the economic outlook of our countries; we improve the lives of our countrypeople. Let's embrace disruption. Let's invest in innovation. Let's change our future.



Kristie Powell is the Vice President and Global Head of Database Operations at American Express. She has held various positions with increasing responsibility at Goldman Sachs and Google throughout her career. Most notably in this space Kristie has served as a Technical Advisor to the Government of The Bahamas on Digital Transformation building next generation platforms. Kristie also serves on the Board of Trustees for the University of The Bahamas.