

Digital tribes and leadership survival skills

This is a working paper which is part of our work on Digital leadership.

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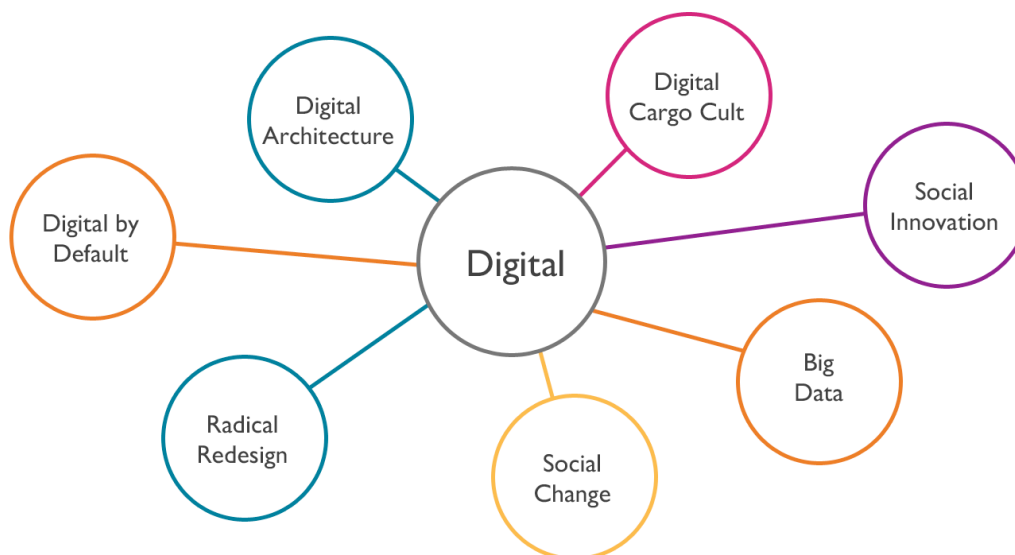
Why Digital? Organisational transformation is never simply a matter of technology.

Real transformation is impossible without behaviour and cultural change and to take advantage of new technologies we need to think and act differently. This paper explores what that means for government leaders, many of whom gained their skills in an era when technology was something you could leave to someone else and digital did not exist.

In this paper we argue four main points:

1. **The need to understand the Network Society:** Leaders need to be aware of the wider social and economic changes which are responses to the growth of digital and networked technologies
2. **The need to blend different uses of digital:** Leaders need an appreciation of the full range of digital 'tribes' or approaches in order to blend these appropriately within their organization
3. **The need to connect cultural and technological change programmes:** Leaders need to be able to connect cultural and organizational change with the transformation use of new technologies
4. **The need to keep leadership skills relevant:** To tackle this agenda leaders need to examine their own core skills and competencies and those of their teams

We suggest the types of skills needed and start to explore how gaps might be addressed. In doing so we are looking at the full range of digital thinking which we believe spans these 7 different areas:



Beyond technical skills there is the opportunity to embrace cultural and behavioral values such as co-production or openness. Effectiveness in the digital realm is not, we believe, predicated by your technical knowledge. Digital skills, behaviours and technologies offer the opportunity to re-shape our organisations and fundamentally shift our relationship with the citizen. They also risk running out of control, wasting resources and delivering unexpected and unwelcome outcomes. The balance of this is down to the skills

and knowledge of our decision makers – these are basic survival skills for leaders in a digital and networked age.

Background

The pressure to transform the way in which every aspect of government operates continues to build. This pressure comes most immediately from acute financial challenges but also from an increasingly voiced view that we simply need to do things differently. We need join up services not just because it's cheaper but because it's better. We need to reorganise what we do around the troubled family not around organisational silos, around the patient and not the providers, around communities not services. We need to reorganise around citizens so that they can participate more effectively in their own care, their own services, and in their own communities. We need to communicate differently and we need to change the nature of our relationship with the public.

Greater use of digital is discussed as being central to this transformation, but what do we mean when we talk about digital? Is it just more widgets and gadgets or are we talking about more than that? Do we have a common view of what it means to be more digital? Its less than 20 years since Tim Berners Lee invented the World Wide Web, 10 years since the first eGovernment programme and only 4 years since the Government Digital Service was set up with a remit to transform the way in which central government use technology. This is a fast moving agenda that is becoming increasingly critical for government as it faces other challenges.

This paper has been developed by Catherine Howe following discussions between representatives of Solace, Socitim and the LGA amongst others. Our perception is that many organisations may be being constrained in their pursuit of an effective digital agenda, both by a lack of clarity about the answer to this question and by a lack of skills around the top table. While no CEX or Leader would claim that digital has no place in solving the complex 'wicked' issues they are facing, very few appear to have the knowledge, or access to the knowledge, that they need in order to leverage it effectively and to make it a key enabler to their central strategy rather than a single strand of activity. More than that, many leaders have not yet had time to reflect on the cultural changes that they are seeing within their communities and organisations and link these to the way in which digital tools are increasingly shaping relationships as well as transactions.

Knowledge appears to be patchy, and in the large part not connected directly to the experience of the leadership team, which means that the cultural changes those digital programmes bring with them may not be fully understood. This is of course a generalisation but it is a well-tested statement that has been achieving resonance with many of the leaders we have already spoken to.

In the following sections we explore some of the ways in which the term digital is being used around government, and the skills that leaders may need in order to effectively take advantage of the opportunities that digital approaches undoubtedly offer. This is intended as a starting point for a discussion with government leaders to ensure that the knowledge they feel is needed is available to the sector. It is intended as a provocation to start a wider debate about what it means to be a local government leader in a networked and digital age.

What do we mean by digital?

Digital is being used to describe more than simply the technology to deliver digital solutions. Often through the growth of social media as a communications channel, the term has moved out of the ICT department and into the wider organisation with it being used to support projects ranging from simple back office collaborations to more radical service redesign programmes.

Outside of the council we see digital and networked technologies transforming our economy, and even 'traditional' technology companies like Microsoft are under significant threat from their younger and more agile competitors like Google. More than that, we talk about living in a 'digital age'; we are all spending more time online in terms of shopping, news and services in our own lives. Digital seeps into the DNA of our organisations. Digital, and specifically digital and networked technologies, such as social media, are having an effect on our society and our organisations, beyond the simple addition of another communication or storage medium. Leaders need to be able to engage with the strategic issues and opportunities that it brings.

In considering the issue of what it means to lead an organisation where digital is breaking out all over, we are starting to identify some important questions:

- What is the relationship to culture change and workforce renewal?
- Is the biggest challenge moving from an industrial model of management to something more appropriate to a digital age? Do we need increase pace and flexibility?
- How do we make sure this is more than simply a technical refresh of infrastructure?
- Are we using digital to shape the future or simply relying on it to help us react more effectively?
- Does it mean something different to be a leader in a digital context?

Every profession and area of expertise is currently trying to answer this question but do we have a common understanding of what we mean when we talk about digital? We have a model answer to this question but this needs testing and refining:

Digital is a broad term that can be used simply to express a desire to shift more services to be delivered online through to the radical redesign of services with the result of the emergence of a new relationship between citizen and state.

Technology or Social Change?

It is easy to engage in a 'chicken and egg' discussion around the question of which came first; the technology or the social change. It could be argued that this is because each feeds the other - new technologies open up opportunities to behave differently, and some of them stay with us in the form of lasting social change. Some examples of the changes that we have seen over the last 10 years include:

- **Self Publication: Disintermediation of the Media**

The ability for anyone to publish, or micro-publish in the form of Twitter, our own views directly online has permanently changed the way in which the media works and the mainstream press is still trying to catch up. More subtly this changes our relationships with our politicians and our democracy, as we move from having authoritative trusted sources of information to a myriad of smaller information feeds judged on more social criteria.

- **Virtual Community and Social Networking: Wide scale use of Networked Power**

Virtual Communities have been in evidence since the 80's and can be shown to have profound effects on people's lives. More recently social networking platforms have taken these beyond the realms of bounded communities and networks to operate as vast networked publics where individuals are able to achieve vast reach. Networked power, the ability to utilise that reach, is also prevalent and networks have become a more visible, accessible and usable part of our social infrastructure.

- **Collaborative Culture: Creating a sharing economy**

We see increasing numbers of people exploring collaborative models of consumption of goods and services; ranging from car sharing to couch surfing. These kinds of movements are in their very earliest stages but speak to a generation of people who do not expect to have the material benefits which their parents have enjoyed.

- **Radical Openness: Disruption of the democratic relationship**

Deep within the 'DNA' of the internet is a pull to share information, and this is reflected culturally with the public expecting increasing levels of transparency and access to information. There are many good reasons for government to welcome this pull but also many practical and philosophical issues to overcome.

- **Networked Technology: Smart Cities and new streams of information**

Our 'stuff' is getting smarter. As more and more devices and objects, ranging from street furniture to rubbish trucks, become able to generate location and usage data, we are creating vast pools of information about the places where we live and work.

- **Customisation, Making and Self-Service: Disruption of manufacturing and the industrial economy**

So many of the new digital platforms which we see are about the disruption of the production process and a move towards self service, which when done well suits the provider and the customer better. Behind the scenes however, techniques such as 3D printing have the potential to disrupt the supply chain in more fundamental ways and deliver new industrial models.

Disruption is a term used often within the 'digital' conversation – it's a way of referencing the power of these ideas and tools to completely change the nature of a service or organization – think of book selling before Amazon completely changed the landscape of retail. Any of these disruptions might be a point of entry for decision makers and each of these can legitimately be argued to be 'digital'. However the danger is in viewing it as just one of these things and as a result locking a complex organisation like a council into just one mode of digital thinking. We are arguing that to be effective councils will need to embrace the full breadth of the digital agenda.

Who is already taking about 'Digital'?

We have been developing a model of 'digital tribes' - different perspectives on digital that can be found within many organisations. We use the term tribes as the followers of these can be evangelical and exclusive – these are not based necessarily on professional skills as these tribes can be found in many practitioner groups. Instead they represent different strands of thoughts and ways of approaching the digital arena and often represent emergent thinking as much as tested practice. We suggest the role of the leader is to ensure that you have representation from the tribes you need and that they are working together rather than competing to 'own' digital. We have developed this framework in order to help shape a discussion about what we mean when we talk about digital, because if our suggestion is correct many people are talking about digital from very different perspectives and not yet understanding each other.

It is also important to ensure that the digital landscape is not one which becomes dominated by the technical experts - while a grasp of the technical architecture and basic concepts is needed by all, greater use of new technologies should not in our view result in the ceding of control to the coders and developers. ICT professionals should, in our view be challenged to ensure that they are door openers rather than gate keepers with respect to digital knowledge.

We suggest that we can identify seven distinct groups advocating digital approaches with related but slightly different world views.

1. **Social Change Tribe:** Digital can strengthen our democracy and if we change our relationship with the public and enable people to participate we can world-build for the future
2. **Social Innovation Tribe:** Digital is about new economic models and creating more socially responsible businesses and organizations
3. **Big Data Tribe:** If we know enough about people we can change the environment in which they operate, through behavioural economics and better analysis of what is happening
4. **Radical Redesign Tribe:** Digital is a way to massively disrupt the model and make it better through improved design thinking
5. **Digital by default Tribe:** We can make everything better by putting it online
6. **Digital Architecture Tribe:** If we get the architecture right, the stuff will follow - we need to be cloud based, have 3G, 4G and super fast broadband everywhere
7. **Digital Cargo Cult:** It's shiny! I don't care what it does but I want it

These are caricatures and as a result exaggerated but as will be discussed in the next section each have their foundation in an area of expertise and behaviours. The reason we draw these caricatures however is to underline the fact that many leaders are, often unknowingly, following just one tribe.

1. Digital as a vehicle for social change

Local government has always been a steady, if sometimes slow (compared to the private sector), adopter of technology in the back office but it can be argued that the disruptive - both positive and negative - potential of digital was first seen with respect to social media. The ability of citizens to connect directly to individual officers and members and also to organise more visibly and effectively in their communities has uncovered the potential for new ways of working. Starting with lone and lonely Twitter accounts and Facebook pages, local government's use of social media is now mainstream and moving rapidly beyond the communications department.

Members of the Social Change Tribe are interested in the ways in which digital technologies have the potential to change the relationships between citizen and state and move towards more co-productive relationships, with citizens being more empowered and more active in decision making and service delivery. Their focus is on the way in which technology opens up the potential for new forms of power and the emergence of a participatory culture both online and offline.

For this group the emphasis with respect to digital is on social change and the emergence of a network society, as well as the redefinition of the citizen/state relationship. It is this group that is most likely to discuss the effects on the democratic process and be interested in the potential of co-productive or co-operative models.

Points of Reference: InLogov and NESTA on Coproduction, Networked Councillor, CityCamp Brighton

2. Digital as a tool for social innovation

Social innovation, as distinct from social change is concerned with the emergence of new delivery models and social businesses. Straddling the space between VSO and the private sector, the Social Innovation Tribe sees a role for new models of consumption and ownership outside of government but with strong social values. Related to new commissioning models social innovation can be seen by its supporters as offering the potential for a smaller and more agile state with related and like minded organisations providing services.

For this tribe technology is no more than a means to an end and it's the cultural and behavioural aspects of digital which are most relevant. These are projects/organisations which would not exist without modern technology but whose activities may be predominantly offline.

Points of reference: Kickstarter, Casserole Club, Patient Opinion, Lambeth Co-operative Councils

3. Big data and its potential to change behaviours

We are living amongst data riches - we capture more information on an hourly basis than the ancient world would have captured in a year. However, we are as yet imperfect at translating that data into information, and beyond that into actionable knowledge. The Big Data Tribe believe that technology has the potential to provide us with the information we need to use our resources more effectively, and that if we only listened more effectively to this we would make better decisions. More than that, big data is inextricably linked to

theories of behavioural economics and 'nudge thinking', suggesting that by understanding 'real' behaviours we are able to engineer services to manage demand.

Big data requires very specific skills and infrastructure around it to support this potential, and this goes hand in hand with the skills and infrastructure needed to deliver partnership working and collaboration around programmes like troubled families. The flip side of this is some difficult questions still to be answered around privacy and participation.

The companion to big data is open data - a drive to not only create and make usable big data sets but also to open it up for civic and commercial use. Open data is a key component for many of the other tribes, but in the abstract rather than the messy technical detail that the Big Data Tribe bring to it.

Points of reference: Work from Impower in Coventry, Nudge Unit at Cabinet Office, ODI, London Data Store, Dublin Open Data project

4. Digital as a platform for innovation and creative disruption

Design thinking has rightly gained traction within government circles, partly following the GDS success in applying design rich techniques to their work on the Central Government web estate. Design techniques such as co-design, prototyping and to some extent development approaches such as lean or agile are all related to the potential that this tribe see for 'proper' design thinking to open up opportunities for radical service redesign. This group sees technology as meaning we no longer need to be constrained by old ways of working and that digital is an enabler of new ways of working.

Alongside design thinking is often a focus on innovation techniques, and a desire to model the behaviour of start-ups such as Couchsurfing or community groups such as Incredible Edible within the the organisation.

Points of reference: NESTA, Creative Councils programme, Shift Surrey

5. Digital by Default

Often based in the ICT department, the Digital by default Tribe see technology as a tool that can make us more efficient and have an ongoing programme to put services online. In many ways this is the continuation of the eGovernment programmes of the last decade but with greater take up and evidence of user need. As a result many of these programmes continue the transactional thinking of the eGovernment agenda, and while service redesign is often included it can be limited with respect to the involvement of people without technical skills and without reference to customer experience.

Points of reference: new SOCITIM report

6. Digital Architects: If we build it they will come

The Digital Architect Tribe is concerned with infrastructure. They believe that technology provides the infrastructure we need to live our lives in different ways and that if we provide this then change will follow. Their emphasis is on creating the environment needed for the growth of digital in a locality, and they often

make a strong link to local economic planning and growth as well as smart cities thinking and design of the public realm. Their areas of concern are around broadband infrastructure, 3G and 4G networks and often the digital and related social inclusion concerns.

Internally they will often be concerned with cloud technologies and perhaps mobile or BYOD working - they want to put the right context in place for people to be able to work more digitally. The weakness of this tribe is often in having made weak connections to the networks who will use the infrastructure that they are providing.

Points of reference: Bournemouth, Cornwall, Calderdale, BDUK

7. Digital Cargo Cults

This is perhaps the most unfair of these caricatures, however every technologist will have encountered senior managers who are enamored with the 'shiny' nature of new technology without having a grounding in what that technology actually does. The most common instance of this is often the pursuit of apps for everything, flying in the face of understanding what services or transactions actually work best in that format. This is a tricky area - to be a leader in this area you must to some extent be enamored with the tech but without joining the cargo cult. To guard against this, leaders need to be well informed about new technology trends and concepts so that they can make strategic decisions.

Points of reference: Cargo cults in the south pacific

How do they relate to each other?

There is a lot of cross over between these world views but our observation is that leaders seem to start, or at least be at home, with one of them. As we said at the outset these are all caricatures, but as with all caricatures we hope they work because there is a grain of truth in them.

The more sophisticated view is in the relationships between tribes and the ordering of priorities which each of these important (well apart from the last) areas might have focused on them. The Architects for example might be laying the groundwork for service redesign or social change, the Big Data Tribe may be preparing the way for social innovation. The common features are also important; in each of these strands of thought you can find qualities of open government, networked behaviours and digital inclusion.

We will be testing this categorisation over the coming months and refining it, but we will also be asking some more fundamental questions as to which of these world views have a philosophy of government behind them. Where is the values-based conversation in all this?

The full scope of this debate about 'what is digital' goes beyond digital, and leaders need to focus on how this range of world views relates to a values-based discussion of the kind of future that local government is trying to create.

What does this mean in terms of skills, knowledge and behaviors?

In instigating this we have started with the assumption that at present many senior teams are lacking the skills needed to build the tribal knowledge (outlined in the last section) into their core strategic programmes. This assumption will be tested in the next phase of this work, but it is based on many informal conversations with leaders who seem to be struggling to a greater or lesser extent with the impact of digital on their organisations. If correct, this assumption brings with it a question as to whether it is reasonable or appropriate to expect our leaders to have a minimum level of knowledge with respect to digital in the wider social as well as technical sense. And if so what might these skills be?

However skills are just a small part of the landscape – as we have tried to argue here ‘digital culture’ is as important and the technology that supports it and see a role for leaders in both responding to and shaping this in the future. For example, co-production can be seen as a method but done well it also represents a fundamental shift in the relationships between participants. The same could be said of asset based community development. Open data can simply be a technical project or a gateway to a much more transparent and accountable way of working. The behaviors and attitudes of our decision makers and their ability to connect the cultural to technical transformation will be critical in the scope of change which is possible.

Further to this, if we do have this expectation does this change the type of people who should be in leadership positions or does it simply mean that we have to up skill leaders (and potential leaders)?

In examining this area we have drawn a distinction between the skills and knowledge that we believe a leader needs access to (but doesn’t necessarily need to have themselves), and those skills and attributes which are needed to be effective as a digital leader. These will be tested over the coming months and further refined.

Practical skills and practitioners

The first grouping of skills is with respect to practical skills that should be available to leaders but are not necessary to have directly. Some of these are new skills, others are evolutions of existing skill sets.

This second element is perhaps simplest to describe. We see a need for professional support around new ways of working in all areas but specifically in these groups:

- **Communications:** Ability to communicate internally and externally using new tools and technologies. More than this communications professionals should be digital enablers for the rest of the organisation and not simply gate keepers for social media.
- **Legal:** Digital projects often have a very different risk profile and as a result require different contractual, legal and governance arrangements.
- **Human resources and organisational development:** HR support is vital in embedding new organisational behaviours and setting new rules and cultural norms.
- **ICT:** It goes without saying that you need an ICT department who are ready to engage strategically as door openers and enablers as the organisation embraces the wider digital agenda.
- **Commissioning:** Often digital solutions need to be developed and procured in different ways to more transactional services. Having a procurement team which is able to connect to what you are trying to achieve is vital as is the involvement of frontline staff in this process

These are perhaps the main areas of the organisation where leaders will want to draw on 'digital' skills and thinking and connect to the emergent best practice in each of these fields. There are others; for example democratic services and policy making or community engagement.

There are also some 'new' skills we are starting to identify which also apply:

- **Research and prototyping:** Many of the projects within the scope of digital are experimental. To make them work, and also decide what might scale up and become operational, its increasingly important to have the ability to approach the learning as research and run effective experiments.
- **Agile programme management:** Flexible project management is needed in order to manage programmes with an uncertain and often experimental route towards fairly abstract goals in many cases.
- **Co-design:** Involving users in service redesign requires appropriate skills and discipline to be effective.
- **Open data and data governance:** the management of large data sets brings with it many practical and governance issues, with information security being a common point of friction with respect to shared services and other collaboration efforts. Data governance and security expertise can help overcome this.
- **Data analysis and information skills:** Further to data governance is a more simple need for better data analysis skills. Where previously only a few teams were working with 'big data', as this becomes more widespread in the organisation the need for relevant skills grows.
- **Horizon scanning and research:** Staying on top of the next big thing or development is increasingly important and comes with the need to ensure that technologies are future proofed.

Once again, we believe many of these skills will already be present in local government, but they are as yet patchy and often represent single points of failure in organisations with major programmes being dependent on untested and unsupported skill sets.

Direct knowledge and practice

Access to skills is one thing but we are suggesting some skills are needed within the personal skill sets of leaders, or at least within the leadership team. The most fundamental skills of leadership and communication continue to be essential but need to be evolved for the new context. More detailed skills or knowledge needed are:

- An adequate understanding of the basic lexicon of digital
- An understanding of networked power and the 'social' skills needed for social media (irrespective of personal engagement with these channels)
- An ability to manage iterative processes and work collaboratively internally and externally
- An awareness of trends and new developments and accepting of the need for continuous learning in this environment
- An awareness of the digital world and all of the 'tribes' as we described them

Looking beyond skills, the list below starts to outline some of the leadership attributes which can be drawn from the tribe categories:

- Relevance: Digital demands a greater degree of thinking in public, and networks feed on perpetually renewed relevance. People won't trust you unless they understand the way you think.
- Digital leaders need to 'be human': Think about the human connection the technology makes to the citizens.
- Co-design: You need to understand how it works. Without this understanding, digital leaders can fail.
- You need to be tolerant of the perpetual beta: Accept the fact that digital solutions are constantly evolving and that it's a good thing that the website is never going to be finished. Change is perpetual.
- Digital leaders need to have big data thinking: They need to understand about reach rather than volume. How do you commission the right information from the data you have? Don't ask for a report, ask for a dashboard.
- Anything to do with digital has to be on a perpetual learning curve.

These attributes are going to be the subject of some further research and interviews which we want to conduct with CEXs and other senior officers over the next month. In doing so we are starting to develop some potential tests for digital leadership behaviours to help people inform their own practice. These are deliberately informal and might include:

- They can brief their members on the way in which their working practices need to change
- They are able to communicate directly with their staff in a 'social' format
- They can discuss place shaping in terms of digital civic space
- You can take them to an unconference and they know what to do
- They are personally active in the digital space in some way They are able to spot potential and opportunities and make good choices about what to back

- They can instruct their ICT team to release data without running up against countless rules they don't understand

What next?

As we said at the outset - this paper is intended to act as a provocation for debate around the question of digital leadership. This is really driven by three questions:

1. Do we have a skills gap around digital in the leadership of local government?
2. Has this paper started to outline the areas where these gaps exist?
3. Is it right to expect a certain level of skills in this area from our leaders and future leaders?

We will be posing these questions to a variety of CEXs and other senior officers both online and offline, with the intention of creating a follow up report which can both describe in more detail the context of this debate - building on the starting point in this paper - and also start to shape a potential response. If you would like to be involved in this process then please contact us (details below).

This work leaves open two important issues which we would hope to address in the future:

1. What is the intersection between this work and more mainstream work on leadership practice?
2. Is there a place for a parallel discussion about the model of government and the values of the organisation?

This work has already been tested informally and it is clear from these early conversations that some kind of skills gap does exist – our ambition is to find the most effective way of starting to address this.

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