

# Bridging Digital Skills and Bureaucratic Reform: Community-Based Training for Transforming Administrative Practices in Local Government Institutions

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## Abstract

*This study addresses a persistent gap in local government reform, where improvements in individual digital skills rarely translate into systemic bureaucratic transformation. It aims to develop and evaluate a community-based training model that bridges digital capacity building and sustainable administrative reform. Adopting a qualitative approach with a participatory action research design, the study integrates service-learning principles to foster collaborative engagement between researchers and local government actors. The research process includes problem identification, co-design and implementation of practice-oriented training, continuous mentoring, and iterative evaluation through observations, document analysis, and reflective sessions. The findings demonstrate that the intervention significantly enhances digital competencies while promoting more efficient administrative practices, such as electronic archiving, digital correspondence, and structured data management. Beyond technical improvements, the training fosters an emerging organizational culture characterized by professionalism, transparency, and accountability. These transformations are sustained through collective learning and critical reflection rather than one-off training activities. The study's novelty lies in proposing a "bridging mechanism" model that integrates technical, cultural, and structural dimensions to connect individual capacity development with broader bureaucratic reform. This model contributes to advancing digital governance and public administration literature, particularly in developing contexts.*

**Keywords:** Bureaucratic Reform, Community-Based Training, Digital Governance, Digital Skills, Public Administration



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## INTRODUCTION

The acceleration of digital transformation in public administration has become an unavoidable trajectory for governments worldwide, particularly in developing and transitional societies where demands for efficient, transparent, and accountable services are intensifying (Isah et al., 2025; Verusha Ali et al., 2025). Despite substantial investments in digital infrastructure and capacity-building initiatives, many local government institutions continue to operate within deeply entrenched conventional bureaucratic systems. This disjunction reveals a persistent and often overlooked problem: the gap between the acquisition of individual digital skills among public officials and the institutionalization of

those skills into everyday administrative practices. Empirical observations across various local governance contexts indicate that digital tools are frequently underutilized, fragmented, or even abandoned after initial implementation phases, resulting in administrative processes that remain manual, slow, and vulnerable to inefficiency and opacity (Mirkova & Padrón-Fumero, 2025; Shawar et al., 2025; Tatic et al., 2025). In Indonesia and comparable settings, this phenomenon is further compounded by structural rigidity, limited organizational learning, and the absence of sustained engagement between training providers and bureaucratic actors (Srirejeki & Khairurrizqo, 2025; Valbuena et al., 2025). Consequently, digital transformation initiatives often fail to produce meaningful or lasting institutional change, raising critical questions about the effectiveness of prevailing approaches to bureaucratic reform.

This issue is not merely technical but fundamentally socio-institutional. The persistence of conventional administrative practices, even in digitally equipped environments, suggests that technological adoption alone is insufficient to drive transformation. Studies have shown that successful digital governance requires alignment between technological systems, organizational culture, and institutional frameworks (Chankseliani et al., 2025; Trafford, 2025). However, existing interventions tend to isolate these dimensions, focusing either on technological deployment or short-term training programs that prioritize skill acquisition without addressing broader systemic dynamics. As a result, public officials may acquire digital competencies, yet lack the contextual support, motivation, or structural conditions necessary to integrate these competencies into their work routines. This disconnect ultimately undermines the potential of digital innovation to enhance public service delivery and erodes public trust in government institutions (Dewanto, 2020; Kanbara et al., 2025; Rahmania et al., 2025).

Scholarly attention to digital transformation in public administration has grown significantly over the past two decades, producing a rich body of literature that explores its technological, organizational, and governance dimensions. Early work by Ameridyani et al. (2025) and Vujić et al. (2025) introduced the concept of “design–reality gaps,” emphasizing the mismatch between technological solutions and local administrative contexts. Building on this, Kabir et al. (2025) and; Marquardt et al. (2025) proposed the paradigm of digital-era governance, highlighting the shift toward integrated, user-centric public services. More recent studies have examined the role of digital leadership, institutional capacity, and policy frameworks in shaping transformation outcomes (Kumeh et al., 2025; Supranoto et al., 2025). These contributions underscore the complexity of digital reform processes and the need for holistic approaches that go beyond technological determinism.

Parallel to this, another strand of research has focused on digital literacy and capacity-building among public sector employees. Scholars have emphasized the importance of developing not only technical skills but also cognitive and adaptive competencies that enable public officials to navigate rapidly changing technological environments (Nurasheva et al., 2024; Sharma & Singh, 2025). Training programs, workshops, and professional development

initiatives have been widely implemented to address these needs. However, empirical evaluations often reveal that such programs produce limited long-term impact, particularly when they are delivered in isolation from organizational change efforts (Isbah et al., 2026; Myers et al., 2022). This suggests that capacity-building initiatives must be embedded within broader institutional strategies to be effective.

A growing body of literature has also examined the role of organizational culture and institutional dynamics in shaping administrative reform. Studies indicate that bureaucratic inertia, hierarchical structures, and risk-averse attitudes can significantly hinder innovation in the public sector (Afriyie & Abass, 2020; Ardiana et al., 2025; Jeyacheya & Hampton, 2020). In this context, transformation requires not only new tools and skills but also shifts in values, norms, and practices. The concept of public service motivation has been identified as a critical factor influencing the willingness of officials to adopt new ways of working (Allam, 2021; Oda et al., 2025). Moreover, collaborative and participatory approaches have been shown to facilitate organizational learning and foster a sense of ownership among stakeholders (Bhatt & Samanhudi, 2022; Haryanto & Nurlinah, 2025; Sanders et al., 2020).

In recent years, the integration of community engagement and service-learning into public administration has emerged as a promising avenue for bridging the gap between theory and practice. Service-learning, which combines academic learning with community-based service, has been widely applied in higher education to promote experiential learning and civic engagement (Clements et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2024). Its application in governance contexts, however, remains relatively underexplored. Some studies suggest that participatory and community-based approaches can enhance the relevance and sustainability of capacity-building initiatives by grounding them in local realities and fostering continuous interaction between knowledge producers and practitioners (Attefah et al., 2025; Duong & Nguyen, 2026; Siregar et al., 2025). Yet, empirical evidence on how such approaches can be systematically integrated into bureaucratic reform processes is still limited.

Although these strands of scholarship have provided valuable insights, they tend to operate in parallel rather than in convergence. Research on digital governance often prioritizes systems and policies, while studies on capacity building focus on individuals, and work on community engagement emphasizes participatory processes. The intersections among these domains, particularly in the context of local government institutions in developing regions, remain insufficiently examined. This fragmentation creates a conceptual and practical disconnect, where efforts to improve digital competencies do not necessarily translate into transformed administrative systems, and where participatory approaches are not fully leveraged to support institutional change.

Against this backdrop, this study advances an integrative perspective that brings together digital skills development, bureaucratic reform, and community-based engagement within a single analytical and practical framework. By situating training interventions within a participatory action research design and embedding them in service-learning processes, the study implicitly articulates a mechanism through which individual learning can be connected

to organizational and institutional transformation. This approach foregrounds not only the acquisition of technical competencies but also the co-construction of new administrative practices, the negotiation of meaning among actors, and the gradual reconfiguration of bureaucratic norms and procedures.

The contribution of this research lies in its effort to move beyond fragmented approaches and to conceptualize training as a transformative process that operates across multiple levels. In doing so, it offers a nuanced understanding of how digital skills can become embedded within everyday administrative routines, and how such embedding can, in turn, support broader reform agendas. The study also highlights the importance of sustained engagement, reflexivity, and contextual adaptation in achieving meaningful change, suggesting that transformation is less a linear outcome of policy implementation and more an emergent process shaped by interaction and learning.

Guided by this perspective, the study aims to develop and empirically examine a community-based training model that facilitates the integration of digital competencies into administrative practices within local government institutions. It seeks to explore how participatory and experiential learning approaches can enhance not only individual capabilities but also organizational effectiveness and institutional accountability. By doing so, the research aspires to contribute to the growing discourse on sustainable public sector innovation and to provide actionable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars engaged in the design and implementation of capacity-building and community engagement initiatives.

### RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach grounded in a participatory action research (PAR) design, as the research seeks not only to understand social phenomena but also to actively engage in transforming administrative practices within local government institutions. A qualitative paradigm is particularly appropriate because the core problem addressed in this study lies in the complex interplay between individual competencies, organizational culture, and institutional structures, dimensions that cannot be adequately captured through purely quantitative measures. PAR is selected as it enables a cyclical process of reflection, action, and learning, allowing researchers and participants to collaboratively diagnose problems, implement interventions, and evaluate changes in real time (Assor, 2025; Larson et al., 2023). This approach aligns with the study's emphasis on service-learning and community engagement, where knowledge is co-produced through practice and critical reflection.

The research was conducted in selected local government institutions in Ambon City, Indonesia, a context that represents many characteristics of transitional bureaucratic systems in developing regions. The choice of location is grounded in both empirical and practical considerations. Empirically, local governments in this setting have initiated digital transformation programs but continue to face challenges in integrating these innovations into routine administrative practices. Practically, the proximity and accessibility of the site allowed

sustained engagement, which is essential for PAR processes that require iterative interaction and trust-building between researchers and participants. The setting thus provides a relevant and dynamic environment to explore how digital skills training can be translated into institutional change.

The study involved 15 informants selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that participants possessed direct experience and relevance to the research focus. These included local government officials across different hierarchical levels, administrative staff responsible for document management and service delivery, and a small number of facilitators involved in training implementation. The inclusion of diverse roles was intended to capture multiple perspectives on administrative practices and digital adoption. Informants were chosen not only for their formal positions but also for their willingness to engage in reflective and collaborative processes, which is a critical requirement in participatory research (Beheshtinia et al., 2025; Çetin, 2025; Tritto & Camba, 2022). This composition allowed the study to trace changes at individual, organizational, and institutional levels.

Data collection was carried out through a combination of in-depth interviews, participant observation, document analysis, and reflective discussions integrated within the training process. In-depth interviews were used to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to digital practices and bureaucratic routines. Participant observation enabled the researcher to directly witness how administrative processes evolved during and after the intervention, capturing subtle shifts in behavior and interaction that might not emerge in interviews alone (Dirhamsyah et al., 2022; Kurniasih et al., 2021). Document analysis, including administrative records, digital correspondence, and policy guidelines, provided additional insights into structural changes and the formalization of new practices. Reflective discussions, conducted periodically throughout the intervention, served as both a data source and a mechanism for collective learning, reinforcing the participatory nature of the study.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation was applied across data sources, methods, and perspectives. Data triangulation was achieved by comparing information obtained from different informants and institutional roles. Methodological triangulation involved cross-validating findings from interviews, observations, and document analysis. In addition, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants to confirm the accuracy and resonance of the findings (Lahiri-Dutt et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2020). This iterative validation process not only enhanced the rigor of the analysis but also strengthened the collaborative ethos of the research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Reframing the Problem: The Disconnection Between Digital Skills and Bureaucratic Practice

The initial phase of this study reveals a pattern that is at once familiar and paradoxical: while local government officials have increasingly been exposed to digital technologies through various training programs and policy initiatives, this exposure has not translated into substantive changes in everyday administrative practices. Interviews and observations conducted during the early stages of the participatory action research process indicate that many officials possess a basic level of digital literacy, including the ability to operate standard office applications and access online systems. However, these competencies often remain detached from the routines that structure bureaucratic work. As one informant (R), an administrative staff member responsible for document processing, explained, “We already know how to use the computer, even some online systems, but for official documents we still follow the manual process because that is what is required.” This statement reflects a broader tendency observed across participants, where digital skills are treated as supplementary rather than integral to administrative procedures.

This disconnection becomes more apparent when examining how tasks are actually performed within institutional settings. Participant observation during routine administrative activities shows that even in offices equipped with computers and internet access, processes such as correspondence, archiving, and reporting are frequently carried out in parallel systems, digital tools are used for drafting or temporary storage, while final documentation is printed, signed manually, and stored in physical archives. Document analysis further confirms this pattern, revealing that formal administrative guidelines continue to prioritize paper-based workflows, thereby reinforcing conventional practices. In this context, digital tools do not replace existing systems but are layered onto them, creating redundancy rather than efficiency. Such findings resonate with earlier observations that technological adoption in public sector organizations often results in “digital veneers” that mask the persistence of traditional bureaucratic logics (Samson & Warganegara, 2021; Tun & Lassa, 2023).

The persistence of these conventional practices cannot be understood solely as a matter of individual resistance or lack of competence. Rather, it reflects a deeper structural and cultural configuration within the bureaucracy. One of the most salient factors identified in this study is procedural rigidity. Many informants emphasized that administrative actions are tightly bound to formal rules and hierarchical approval mechanisms, which leave little room for experimentation or deviation. As noted by informant M, a mid-level official, “Even if we want to try a digital system, we are not sure if it is officially allowed. If something goes wrong, we are the ones responsible.” This concern highlights the risk-averse nature of bureaucratic environments, where adherence to established procedures is often prioritized over innovation. In such settings, the introduction of digital tools without corresponding adjustments in regulatory frameworks can create uncertainty rather than empowerment.

Closely related to this is the enduring reliance on habitual practices that have been institutionalized over time. Administrative routines, particularly those involving documentation and record-keeping, are deeply embedded in organizational memory and are often perceived as the safest and most legitimate way of working. These routines are not merely technical procedures but carry symbolic weight, representing accountability, legality, and organizational order. As a result, shifting from paper-based to digital systems is not simply a matter of changing tools but involves reconfiguring the meanings attached to administrative actions. This helps explain why, despite recognizing the potential benefits of digitalization, many officials continue to reproduce conventional practices in their daily work.

Another critical dimension emerging from the data is the limited nature of institutional support for integrating digital competencies into practice. While training programs are frequently conducted, they are often short-term, standardized, and disconnected from the specific contexts in which participants operate. Informants reported that such programs tend to focus on technical instruction without addressing how these skills can be applied within existing administrative frameworks. As expressed by informant N, "After the training, we go back to the office, but there is no follow-up. So, we just return to our usual way of working." This lack of continuity undermines the potential impact of training initiatives and reinforces the gap between learning and practice. Moreover, the absence of ongoing mentoring or organizational incentives further limits the motivation of officials to adopt new approaches.

These findings suggest that the problem at hand is not simply a deficit of digital skills but a misalignment between different layers of change, individual, organizational, and institutional. From a conceptual standpoint, this aligns with the understanding of digital transformation as a socio-technical process, where technological innovation must be accompanied by changes in structures, cultures, and practices to be effective (Revina et al., 2023; Suardi et al., 2025; van Helden et al., 2021). In this light, the limited impact of digital training can be seen as a consequence of interventions that target only one dimension of this complex system. Without addressing the broader organizational environment, individual competencies remain underutilized and disconnected from meaningful change.

### **Co-Constructing Change: Community-Based Training as a Transformative Intervention**

The implementation of community-based training in this study did not follow the conventional logic of top-down capacity building, where knowledge is transferred in a linear and standardized manner from trainers to participants. Instead, it unfolded as a co-constructive process shaped through participatory action research (PAR) and service-learning principles, in which researchers, facilitators, and local government officials jointly engaged in identifying problems, designing interventions, and reflecting on outcomes. From the outset, the training was positioned not as an external program imposed upon participants, but as a collaborative space where administrative challenges could be collectively examined and addressed. This orientation was critical in building trust and fostering a sense of ownership among participants, which in turn influenced the depth and sustainability of engagement throughout the process.

The early stages of the intervention were marked by dialogic encounters, where participants were encouraged to articulate their everyday experiences with administrative work, including the constraints they faced in integrating digital tools. Rather than beginning with predefined modules, the training design emerged iteratively from these conversations. For instance, during an initial workshop session, several participants highlighted recurring difficulties in managing document flows between departments, particularly when transitioning between digital drafts and printed approvals. This concern became the basis for co-developing a practical module on digital correspondence systems. As one participant (S) noted, “This is the first time we are asked what we actually need before the training starts. Usually, we just follow what is given.” Such moments illustrate how the training process itself became a site of negotiation, where participants’ voices shaped both the content and direction of learning.

As the intervention progressed, learning was grounded in practice rather than abstraction. Activities were designed around real administrative tasks, allowing participants to experiment directly with digital tools in contexts that mirrored their daily responsibilities. This “learning by doing” approach enabled participants to move beyond passive understanding toward active problem-solving. For example, during one session focused on electronic archiving, participants worked collaboratively to reorganize existing document records into a shared digital repository. The process was not without challenges, as differences in technical familiarity and work habits surfaced. However, these challenges became opportunities for peer learning and mutual support. Informant A reflected, “At first it was confusing, but because we worked together, we could help each other. It felt more practical than just listening to explanations.” This experiential dimension of learning aligns with broader insights from service-learning literature, which emphasize the role of action and reflection in fostering deeper understanding and skill integration (Goelnitz & Al-Saidi, 2020; Quah, 2019; Sirajuddin et al., 2025).

Equally significant was the role of collective reflection as an integral component of the training process. Reflection sessions were conducted periodically, providing a structured space for participants to discuss what they had learned, the difficulties they encountered, and the implications for their work practices. These sessions often revealed shifts not only in technical competence but also in how participants perceived their roles within the bureaucracy. For instance, several participants began to question long-standing assumptions about the necessity of manual documentation, exploring instead how digital systems could enhance transparency and efficiency. Informant M remarked during one reflection session, “We used to think that physical documents are more secure, but now we see that digital records can actually be more organized and easier to track.” Such reflections indicate an emerging reconfiguration of meaning, where administrative practices are reinterpreted in light of new experiences.

The training environment thus functioned as more than a site for skill acquisition; it became a social space where meanings, norms, and practices were actively negotiated.

Interactions among participants, facilitators, and researchers created a dynamic learning ecology in which knowledge was not simply transmitted but co-produced. This process resonates with the concept of co-production in public services, where value is generated through collaborative interactions among multiple stakeholders rather than through unilateral action (Iqbal, 2026; Sirolli et al., 2025). In this study, co-production was evident not only in the design of training activities but also in the gradual redefinition of what constituted effective administrative practice. Participants were not passive recipients of reform but active contributors to its articulation and implementation.

Furthermore, the participatory nature of the intervention allowed for continuous adaptation in response to emerging needs and contexts. Unlike fixed training programs, the structure remained flexible, enabling facilitators to adjust content and methods based on feedback and observation. This iterative process was particularly important in addressing the diversity of participants' backgrounds and institutional constraints. For example, when it became apparent that some departments faced limitations in internet connectivity, alternative strategies were developed to ensure that digital practices could still be implemented in hybrid formats. Such responsiveness reinforced the relevance of the training and sustained participant engagement over time.

From a broader analytical perspective, the findings underscore the importance of collaborative governance as a framework for understanding transformative interventions in the public sector. As argued by Bhandari et al. (2025), innovation in public services is increasingly driven by cross-actor collaboration, where different forms of knowledge and experience are brought into dialogue. The community-based training model in this study exemplifies this approach by bridging academic expertise, practical knowledge, and institutional realities. It demonstrates that meaningful change is less likely to emerge from isolated interventions and more likely to develop through sustained, interactive processes that engage stakeholders as partners in transformation.

### **From Skills to Practice: Transforming Administrative Routines**

The transformation observed in this study becomes most visible when attention shifts from abstract notions of capacity building to the everyday routines through which administrative work is actually performed. While earlier stages of the intervention revealed a persistent disconnection between digital skills and bureaucratic practice, subsequent cycles of training, mentoring, and reflection began to demonstrate how these skills could be translated into concrete changes in administrative routines. Importantly, this transformation did not occur as an immediate or uniform shift, but rather as a gradual process in which new practices were introduced, tested, adjusted, and eventually stabilized within the workflow of local government offices.

One of the most tangible changes emerged in the domain of document management, particularly in the transition from paper-based archiving to electronic systems. Prior to the intervention, most offices relied heavily on physical storage, with documents organized in folders and cabinets that were often difficult to access and maintain. Through the training

process, participants were introduced to simple yet adaptable digital archiving systems that could be integrated into their existing infrastructure. However, what proved decisive was not the introduction of the technology itself, but the continuous mentoring that accompanied its use. Facilitators worked alongside participants as they digitized existing records, developed naming conventions, and established shared folders that reflected organizational needs. As noted by informant A, “At first, we just scanned documents because we were told to, but over time we started to organize them in a way that makes sense for our work. Now we can find files much faster.” This shift illustrates how technical skills became meaningful only when embedded within practical routines and supported by iterative guidance.

A similar pattern can be observed in the adoption of digital correspondence systems. Traditionally, official communication followed a linear and paper-intensive process involving drafting, printing, manual signatures, and physical distribution. Through the intervention, participants began experimenting with digital workflows, including the use of shared templates, electronic approvals, and internal communication platforms. Initially, these practices were implemented alongside existing procedures, reflecting a cautious approach to change. However, as participants gained confidence and experienced the efficiency of digital systems, they gradually reduced their reliance on manual processes. Informant R described this transition as “a matter of habit,” noting that “once we see that sending documents digitally is faster and still accepted by our supervisors, we start to do it more often.” This observation underscores the importance of repetition and validation in transforming new skills into established routines.

Beyond document handling and correspondence, changes were also evident in the way data related to public services were managed. Before the intervention, data collection and reporting were often fragmented, with information stored in separate files or even personal devices. The training introduced basic principles of structured data management, encouraging participants to develop shared databases and standardized formats for recording service information. Through collaborative exercises, participants learned to align data practices across units, enabling more consistent and accessible records. Informant N reflected on this process, stating, “We used to keep our own data, but now we try to put everything in one place so others can use it too.” This shift toward collective data management not only improved efficiency but also laid the groundwork for greater transparency and accountability within the organization.

What is particularly significant about these changes is not merely their technical nature, but the process through which they were achieved. The translation of digital skills into practice was mediated by a combination of hands-on experimentation, peer interaction, and ongoing facilitation. Participants were not simply instructed on what to do; they were actively involved in shaping how new practices would fit within their specific contexts. This process often involved trial and error, as well as negotiation with existing norms and constraints. For instance, in some cases, participants had to reconcile digital workflows with formal requirements for physical signatures, leading to hybrid solutions that balanced innovation

with compliance. Such adaptations highlight the situated nature of transformation, where change is contingent upon local conditions rather than imposed as a uniform model.

From a conceptual perspective, these findings align with the notion of practice-based change, which emphasizes that institutional transformation emerges from the modification of routine actions rather than from top-down directives alone. As argued by Libassi (2024) and Weng et al. (2021), digital transformation should be understood as a socio-technical process in which new technologies interact with existing practices, gradually reshaping organizational behavior. In this study, the introduction of digital tools did not automatically lead to change; rather, it was through repeated use, reflection, and adjustment that these tools became integrated into daily work. Over time, what began as experimental practices evolved into taken-for-granted routines, indicating a deeper level of institutionalization.

Moreover, the micro-level changes observed in administrative routines began to generate broader organizational effects. As digital practices became more consistent, participants reported improvements in coordination, reduced duplication of work, and faster service delivery. These outcomes, while modest in scale, contributed to a growing sense of efficacy and motivation among participants. Informant M noted, "When we see that our work becomes easier and faster, we feel more confident to continue using these methods." This feedback loop between practice and perception is crucial, as it reinforces the sustainability of change and encourages further innovation.

### **Cultural Shifts in Bureaucracy: Emerging Values of Professionalism, Transparency, and Accountability**

As the intervention progressed beyond the level of technical adjustment and routine modification, a more subtle yet consequential transformation began to emerge at the cultural level of the organization. What initially appeared as a series of practical changes, such as adopting electronic archiving or digital correspondence, gradually evolved into shifts in how public officials understood their roles, responsibilities, and the broader purpose of administrative work. These shifts were not imposed through formal directives but unfolded through repeated engagement in practice, dialogue, and reflection. In this sense, the training functioned not only as a vehicle for skill enhancement but also as a catalyst for reconfiguring the normative foundations of bureaucratic behavior.

One of the most notable developments was the growing internalization of professionalism as a lived value rather than a formal expectation. Prior to the intervention, professionalism was often associated with adherence to established procedures, regardless of their efficiency or relevance. However, as participants engaged with new tools and collaborative problem-solving processes, professionalism began to be reinterpreted in terms of effectiveness, responsiveness, and continuous improvement. This shift is reflected in the testimony of informant M, who observed, "Before, we thought being professional meant following the rules exactly. Now, we see that it also means finding better ways to serve people." Such reflections suggest that professionalism is being redefined from a rule-bound orientation to a more adaptive and outcome-oriented ethos, aligning with contemporary

understandings of public service performance.

Alongside this, the value of transparency became increasingly embedded in everyday practices. The introduction of shared digital systems for document management and data storage created new possibilities for visibility and access, both within and across organizational units. As participants became more accustomed to these systems, they began to recognize the role of transparency not merely as a compliance requirement but as a practical tool for coordination and trust-building. Informant A noted that “when files are stored digitally and everyone can access them, there is less confusion and fewer misunderstandings.” This observation points to a shift in how transparency is experienced, from an abstract principle to a tangible feature of daily work that facilitates collaboration and accountability.

The emergence of accountability as a shared organizational value further illustrates the depth of this cultural transformation. In traditional bureaucratic settings, accountability is often framed in hierarchical terms, with responsibility flowing upward through chains of command. In contrast, the participatory nature of the intervention encouraged a more horizontal understanding of accountability, where individuals felt responsible not only to their superiors but also to their peers and the public they serve. This shift was particularly evident during reflective sessions, where participants openly discussed challenges, acknowledged mistakes, and collectively explored solutions. Informant R expressed this change succinctly: “Now we are more open to discussing problems, because we feel responsible together, not just individually.” Such statements indicate a movement toward a more collaborative and reflexive form of accountability, grounded in shared ownership of outcomes.

Crucially, these cultural shifts did not occur in isolation from the processes that generated them. The integration of reflection as a regular component of the training created a space for participants to critically examine their assumptions and experiences. Through guided discussions, they were able to connect changes in their practices with broader questions about the purpose and impact of their work. This iterative process of action and reflection is central to participatory action research and has been widely recognized as a driver of transformative learning (Jacoby et al., 2021; Lassa et al., 2023; Yasdin et al., 2023). In this study, it enabled participants to move beyond surface-level adoption of new tools toward a deeper reconsideration of their professional identities and institutional roles.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings resonate with the notion of institutional change as a process of learning and reflexivity. Freeman & Schuller (2020) and Makmur (2024) argue that public sector innovation is increasingly shaped by interactive processes in which actors collectively generate, test, and refine new ideas. Rather than being dictated by top-down reforms, change emerges through ongoing engagement and mutual learning. The experience documented in this study reflects this dynamic, as cultural transformation was not predefined but evolved through the interplay of practice, interaction, and reflection. Participants did not simply adopt new values; they co-constructed them through shared experiences and dialogue.

It is also important to note that these cultural shifts were neither uniform nor uncontested. Some participants initially expressed skepticism or discomfort, particularly when new practices challenged long-standing norms. For example, the move toward greater transparency raised concerns about increased scrutiny and potential errors being exposed. However, over time, these concerns were mitigated through collective discussion and the gradual normalization of new practices. This underscores the importance of creating supportive environments where individuals feel safe to experiment and adapt, rather than being pressured to conform to change prematurely.

### **The Bridging Mechanism: Linking Individual Capacity and Institutional Reform**

The findings of this study converge into a conceptual articulation that may be described as a “bridging mechanism,” a processual model that explains how improvements in individual digital capacity can be translated into broader institutional reform. Rather than treating technical skills, organizational culture, and bureaucratic structures as separate domains, the analysis demonstrates that meaningful transformation occurs when these dimensions are continuously connected through practice, interaction, and adaptation. This mechanism does not operate as a linear pathway but as a dynamic interplay in which changes at one level both influence and are shaped by changes at other levels. In this sense, the bridging mechanism offers a way of understanding reform not as a sequence of interventions, but as an emergent configuration of mutually reinforcing processes.

At the technical level, the study shows that the acquisition of digital skills serves as an initial but insufficient condition for change. Participants developed competencies in areas such as electronic archiving, digital correspondence, and structured data management, yet these skills only became consequential when embedded in actual work practices. As reflected by informant A, “Learning the system is one thing, but using it every day is another. We needed time and support to make it part of our routine.” This highlights that technical proficiency alone does not automatically disrupt established practices; it requires ongoing application, contextualization, and reinforcement. The technical dimension of the bridging mechanism, therefore, is not limited to skill acquisition but extends to the situated use of technology within the rhythms of administrative work.

However, the integration of these skills into practice was deeply contingent upon shifts in the cultural dimension. As the previous findings indicate, participants began to reinterpret their roles and responsibilities through values such as professionalism, transparency, and accountability. These values functioned as enabling conditions that legitimized the use of digital tools and encouraged their consistent application. Informant M noted that “once we realized that digital systems could make our work more transparent, we felt more responsible to use them properly.” This suggests that cultural transformation provides the normative foundation upon which technical practices can be sustained. Without such shifts, digital tools risk remaining peripheral or symbolic. In this sense, the cultural dimension acts as a mediating layer that translates individual competencies into shared organizational commitments.

Equally important is the structural dimension, which encompasses the formal and informal rules, procedures, and governance arrangements that shape administrative action. The study found that even when technical skills were present and cultural attitudes were supportive, the absence of structural alignment could hinder the institutionalization of new practices. For example, participants often encountered situations where digital workflows were not fully recognized within existing regulatory frameworks, particularly in relation to documentation and approval processes. As informant R explained, “We can prepare everything digitally, but in the end we still need to print and sign because that is what the system requires.” Such constraints illustrate how structural factors can either enable or constrain the translation of innovation into routine practice.

Yet, rather than viewing these constraints as fixed barriers, the participatory nature of the intervention allowed for gradual adjustments to emerge. Through iterative experimentation and dialogue, participants began to negotiate modifications to existing procedures, introducing hybrid practices that balanced compliance with innovation. Over time, some of these adaptations gained informal acceptance within the organization, signaling the early stages of structural change. This process underscores that institutional reform is not solely the result of top-down policy changes but can also evolve through bottom-up practices that gradually reshape organizational norms and expectations. In this regard, the structural dimension of the bridging mechanism is both a condition and an outcome of transformation.

What distinguishes the bridging mechanism proposed in this study is its emphasis on the interdependence of these three dimensions. Technical, cultural, and structural elements do not operate in isolation; rather, they are continuously enacted and reconfigured through everyday practice. For instance, the successful adoption of a digital archiving system required not only technical skills but also a shared belief in its value and a degree of procedural flexibility that allowed it to be integrated into existing workflows. When one of these elements was absent or misaligned, the process of transformation tended to stall. Conversely, when alignment was achieved, even partially, changes began to stabilize and expand.

This integrative perspective aligns with contemporary understandings of digital transformation as a socio-technical phenomenon that unfolds through the interaction of multiple organizational dimensions (Narayan et al., 2025; Toumbourou et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2025). It also resonates with recent scholarship on collaborative governance, which emphasizes the role of cross-actor engagement and co-creation in driving public sector innovation (Fatemi et al., 2026; Shyamsundar et al., 2020). In the context of this study, the bridging mechanism can be seen as the outcome of sustained collaboration between researchers, facilitators, and practitioners, where knowledge and practice are jointly developed and continuously refined.

Importantly, the mechanism is inherently dynamic and context-sensitive. It does not prescribe a fixed sequence of steps but rather describes a set of relational processes that can take different forms depending on local conditions. The participatory action research design

played a crucial role in enabling this dynamism, as it allowed for ongoing feedback, reflection, and adaptation. Participants were not merely implementing predefined solutions; they were actively shaping the trajectory of change based on their experiences and constraints. Informant N captured this fluidity by stating, “We are still learning, and things are still changing. But now we know how to adjust and improve as we go.” This sense of continuous learning is central to the sustainability of the bridging mechanism.

### **Sustaining Transformation: The Role of Continuous Learning and Embedded Engagement**

The sustainability of administrative transformation emerged as one of the most critical insights of this study, particularly when examining how initial changes evolved beyond the duration of formal training sessions. While earlier findings demonstrated improvements in digital competencies and shifts in administrative routines, it became evident that these changes would not endure without mechanisms that support continuous learning and embedded engagement within the organization. Participants repeatedly emphasized that short-term training, although useful for introducing new concepts, was insufficient to alter deeply ingrained practices. As informant R reflected, “We have attended many trainings before, but usually after some time we go back to the old way. This time feels different because we keep practicing and discussing it together.” This distinction points to the importance of sustained interaction and reinforcement in maintaining change.

The integration of participatory action research (PAR) and service-learning played a central role in fostering this continuity. Unlike conventional training models that operate as discrete events, the approach adopted in this study created an ongoing learning ecosystem in which participants remained actively engaged over time. Through iterative cycles of action, reflection, and adaptation, participants were able to revisit their practices, identify emerging challenges, and collaboratively develop solutions. This cyclical process not only deepened their understanding but also reinforced their commitment to change. Informant M noted that “because we meet regularly and reflect on what we have done, we become more aware of our progress and what still needs to improve.” Such statements illustrate how learning becomes a continuous process embedded within the rhythm of organizational life, rather than an external intervention.

A key element underpinning this sustainability is the role of reflection as both a methodological and cultural practice. Reflection sessions provided structured opportunities for participants to critically examine their experiences, question assumptions, and articulate insights. Over time, these sessions contributed to the normalization of reflexivity as part of everyday work. Participants began to engage in informal reflections outside of scheduled sessions, discussing challenges with colleagues and experimenting with alternative approaches. Informant N described this shift by stating, “Now when we face a problem, we try to think together about how to solve it, not just follow what we have always done.” This indicates that reflection had moved from being a facilitated activity to becoming an internalized organizational habit, which is essential for sustaining adaptive change.

The presence of continuous mentoring further reinforced this learning process. Facilitators did not withdraw after the initial training phase but remained involved as partners who supported participants in navigating practical and institutional constraints. This ongoing engagement allowed for timely feedback and helped participants overcome moments of uncertainty or resistance. For example, when participants encountered difficulties in aligning digital practices with existing procedural requirements, facilitators worked with them to identify feasible adjustments rather than imposing rigid solutions. This relational approach fostered a sense of trust and encouraged participants to persist in their efforts. As informant A expressed, “It helps that we are not left alone. When we face problems, there is someone we can discuss with.” Such support mechanisms are crucial in bridging the gap between intention and sustained practice.

From a broader perspective, these findings highlight the importance of embedding learning systems within organizational structures. Rather than relying on episodic interventions, sustainable transformation requires mechanisms that enable continuous knowledge exchange, experimentation, and adaptation. This aligns with the argument that digital transformation is not a one-time event but an ongoing process that depends on the organization’s capacity to learn and evolve (Agustina et al., 2025; Warsito et al., 2021). In this study, the combination of PAR and service-learning effectively created such a system by integrating learning into daily activities and fostering collective responsibility for improvement.

Moreover, the collaborative nature of the intervention contributed to the institutionalization of these learning processes. By involving participants as co-creators rather than passive recipients, the study cultivated a sense of ownership that extended beyond the duration of the research. Participants began to take initiative in organizing their own learning activities, sharing knowledge with colleagues who were not directly involved in the program, and advocating for the adoption of improved practices within their units. Informant S noted, “We started to teach others what we learned, so the changes can spread.” This diffusion of knowledge indicates that the learning ecosystem had begun to expand organically, increasing the likelihood of long-term impact.

The sustainability of transformation also depended on the gradual alignment between emerging practices and organizational expectations. As digital routines became more established and their benefits more visible, they gained legitimacy within the institution. This, in turn, encouraged broader acceptance and reduced resistance. However, the study also revealed that this process remains ongoing and contingent. Participants acknowledged that maintaining momentum requires continued effort, particularly in the face of staff turnover, policy changes, or resource limitations. Informant M cautioned that “if we stop practicing or if there is no support, it is possible to return to old habits.” This underscores that sustainability is not a fixed outcome but a condition that must be continuously nurtured.

The findings resonate with contemporary perspectives on collaborative governance, which emphasize that public sector innovation is sustained through ongoing interaction and

co-creation among stakeholders (Ariansyah et al., 2023; Ledoh et al., 2026; Mokher & Mella-Alcazar, 2024). In this context, the role of embedded engagement becomes critical, as it ensures that learning processes are not externalized but become part of the organizational fabric. The study demonstrates that when learning is integrated into everyday practices and supported by relational networks, it can generate a self-reinforcing cycle of improvement.

### CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that bridging the gap between individual digital skill development and systemic bureaucratic reform requires more than conventional training interventions; it necessitates an integrative and participatory approach that embeds learning within the everyday realities of administrative practice. By developing and implementing a community-based training model grounded in participatory action research and service-learning, the study shows that digital competencies can be effectively translated into meaningful changes in administrative routines when supported by continuous mentoring, collaborative reflection, and contextual adaptation. The findings indicate that transformation becomes sustainable not simply through technical proficiency, but through the alignment of three interrelated dimensions: the practical use of digital tools, the internalization of professional values such as transparency and accountability, and the gradual adjustment of procedural and organizational structures. In this sense, the study answers its central objective by demonstrating how capacity-building efforts can evolve into broader institutional change when learning is treated as a collective and ongoing process rather than a one-time event. The conceptual contribution lies in articulating a “bridging mechanism” that captures this dynamic interplay, offering a more holistic understanding of how digital governance reforms can take root within local government contexts. At the same time, the study remains grounded in its empirical setting, suggesting that such transformation is contingent, iterative, and shaped by the active involvement of actors within the system, thereby providing a practical yet adaptable framework for future research and community engagement initiatives in public administration.

### ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants’ confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors

take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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