RESEARCH COMPENDIUM

Agility and Smart Working for Municipalities

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Agile and Smart

Working for municipalities

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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly complex and changing world in which, "global crises have become frequent and consequential", many governments, including municipalities have, also, become more aware of the necessity to "reinvent themselves" and to become more agile and smart in their operations.

But what "agile and smart" means, and how can municipalities, and especially local administration of small and peripheral towns and villages evolve and become exactly that – agile and smart?

In April and May 2023, we posed these questions to local leaders, civil servants, and other relevant professionals from Italy, Greece and North Macedonia.

We also explored the existing working and learning practices of municipalities, the needs, opportunities and challenges their employees face.

The compendium, in that regard, explains agility through the "smart" or "remote working" of Italy, as well as through the so called "concept of agility".

The compendium also offers a list of some key skills and competences which municipal employees should have in order to contribute to the transition towards "agile and smart", including list of e-learning tools and practices for further development of those skills.

THE CONCEPT OF AGILITY

The concept of "Agile Government" is an "emerging theme which came as a result of the constant bombardment of crisis" and the inability of Governments of today to rapidly transform and adapt to changes. The concept is an approach to Public Management which became a common term in the discourse on digitization, although "agility" goes beyond digitization or "remote work" of public institutions.

Similar to "agile businesses", agile governments and municipalities are characterized as people centric, less bureaucratic, more open, collaborative, innovative, flexible and "able to evolve to thrive in an environment that demands constant change". And although agility represents different things for different governments, there are key characteristics that public institutions must strive towards in order to be exactly that – agile.

DEFINING
AGILE AND SMART

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1.1. WHAT IS AGILE?

Agility, in general, is seen as the "ability of an entity to renew itself, to adapt and change quickly and to succeed in a rapidly changing, ambiguous and turbulent environment" *(Aaron De Smet)*.

Contrary to some ideas about flexibility, agility is strongly connected to the "need for stability" of an entity in a chaotic environment, and the need to be "more effective, more productive and normatively better.

And when it comes to governments and municipalities, agility means more effective governance, resources mobilization, structuring of institutions, ability to provide services, and to produce public value even in the most turbulent times.

Connected with everyone, Learning from everything and everyone

ENABLING AGILITY IN MUNICIPALITIES

2.1. WHY IS AGILITY IMPORTANT?

The Covid-19 pandemic has underlined the importance of adapting policies, reinventing working models and services of all central and local public institutions. It also underlined the importance of doing better, doing it more quickly, and doing it within tight budgets. In this context, one of the main reasons why public institutions and, especially municipalities need to adopt the concept of agility is to improve their resilience so that working processes and services are not only disturbed, but the quality of these processes and services, and especially the ability of working effectively and providing quality services to all its residents continues.

2.2. HOW TO ACHIEVE AGILITY?

Many experts have explored the subject of agile governments and municipalities, and have highlighted different elements which make governments and municipalities agile. Some of the most common, mentioned so far are: good leadership, trust, technology.

Future proofing

using stress-testing methods to continuously analyze possible future challenges and resilience

Agile Leadership

strong and visionary leaders to enable agility

Agile mindset

right people, focused on right things

Communication

Informal, direct, quick, face-to-face

Collaboration

cross-functional teams from different departments, gathered to work together on same goals

Technology

Investing in technology and digitization of services and processess

Empowerment

offering capacity building, building institutional memory and practice of institutional knowledge-sharing

Culture

building trust, openness, cooperation

2.3. HOW TO MAKE AGILITY WORK IN ITALY, GREECE OR NORTH MACEDONIA?

Seen from the perspective of local experts, civil servants and other participants in the "*fEUture's*" research, agility can be implemented on municipal level if:

☑ municipal leaders and employees **are aware and understand agility** as a concept and model of work, as well as, are aware and **trust in the benefits** it can bring.

☑ they **are willing to adopt** agility, as well as, are **willing to commit** to continuously learn and exchange knowledge and experiences.

☑ **invest in building a supportive environment** for all employees, meaning, there is trust, there is cooperation and open communication.

- ☑ **invest in technology,** innovation and digitization of all processes and procedures.

- ☑ **introduce micromanagement** and, work in smaller and **cross-functional teams** consisted of employees from different departments, focused on achieving same goal(s).

- ☑ develop functional and practical **strategies, plans and guidelines** for agile and smart work.

- ☑ establish **future proofing**, monitoring and feedback (reporting) systems.

- ☑ establish **regular team meetings to discuss progress, results and challenges.**

- ☑ have **funding** to ensure efficient and agile operation of all departments, teams and individuals and proper ICT infrastructure.

> *"Strong leadership is key enabler of agility.*
> *In that regard, agility can't be expected without required leadership skills"*

Agile Government Responsibility to citizens' changing needs. 2015. Public Policy Forum

2.4. WHAT KIND OF LEADERS ARE NEEDED?

According to the respondents: "municipal leaders need to be key advocates for agile work". They must have the right mindset and leadership skills, meaning, (1) to demonstrate confidence in their employees' capacities, 2) offer support, (3) inspire and motivate others towards a common goal - agility.

Municipal leaders also must be open-minded and ready to accept new, smart and innovative solutions to challenges and needs of civil servants and citizens.

They need to be consistent, service oriented and an agent of change. Municipal leaders must have high emotional intelligence, to be approachable and open to different ideas, needs and opinions of citizens, experts and the business community. They must be open to learn from everyone, and most importantly, as highlighted by some of the respondents, agile leaders must have competent team to achieve agility.

2.5. WHAT RESPONSIBILITIES SHOULD AGILE LEADERS AND TEAMS HAVE TO ENABLE AGILITY?

Some of the recommendations made by the respondents consulted during the research are:

- To ensure efficient human resource management;
- To ensure continuous learning of employees;
- To create conditions for agile culture and operation;
- To ensure continuous research, analysis and testing of new ways to improve municipal's work and services;
- To ensure that strategies and plans for agile working and necessary resources are developed;
- To establish a small self-organized team focused on transition and improving agility across departments and processes.
- To possibly appoint "Agile and Smart Working" professional(s) who will be responsible for training and coordinating the transition.

LEARNING, CAPACITY BUILDING AND AGILITY

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3.1. WHY IS KNOWLEDGE IMPORTANT?

Agility not only requires governments and municipalities to introduce agile tools and practices in all of their processes and services but, as mentioned previously, it also requires **agile mindsets** of all individuals - leaders and employees and, even more importantly, requires supportive environment and culture that promotes and encourages **continuous learning and knowledge-sharing**.

In that sense, in an agile municipality, employees have the support needed to develop their skills, to become better professionals, to share their knowledge and also to mentor others.

Hence, learning, knowledge-sharing even mentoring in an agile environment, as experienced during the Covid-19 means, capacity building opportunities that are adaptable, flexible and available to all employees and leaders at any time. But, this also means that institutions invest in 'institutional memory' and 'institutional knowledge-sharing' so that, knowledge, skills and experiences are not trapped in a number of people and, then lost due to leaders and employees transfers to other jobs or due to restructuring or merging of institutions and departments. Furthermore, it also means that all employees have access to knowledge and skills development opportunities, necessary to do their job properly and effectively.

In other words, **agility and quality of municipals' operations and services should not depend solely on the knowledge that one individual has (gained) at a specific moment of their employment there.**

3.2. CIVIL SERVANTS LEARNING IN MACEDONIA

Regular and professional training of civil servants in the country, especially generic training for soft and transversal skills, are centralized and are part of the country's vision to offer systematized and certified training organized by one public institution - the Ministry of information society and administration.

Key generic training, in this regard, for municipal employees is also organized by the Ministry which hosts an e-learning platform too.

Apart from that, local civil servants have available 'in person' and online generic including specialized training offered by the "Association of the units of local self-government of the Republic of North Macedonia" (ZELS), the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe (NALAS e-Academy) and others.

3.3. CIVIL SERVANTS LEARNING IN GREECE

In Greece, e-learning and digital platforms are growing popular for staff development. This is as a result of the advantages they provide, such as affordability, adaptability, and an opportunity to reach a wide audience. Greece has access to a number of online learning tools, such as Moodle, Edmodo, Schoology, and Google Classroom which offer a variety of features, including group project collaboration tools, video tutorials, and interactive quizzes.

For example, a series of e-Lifelong Learning Centres (e-LLC) have been established in Central Greece and South Aegean, focused on enhancing digital, soft and green skills among municipal employees and citizens in these regions. The e-centers were established to serve the needs of the less accessible island municipalities and to lower the administrative and training expenditures.

3.4. CIVIL SERVANTS LEARNING IN ITALY

The launch of e-learning tools in the Italian municipalities was driven by the need to adapt to changing work dynamics, to leverage technological advancements, and provide employees with the necessary skills and resources to thrive in a digital and flexible work environment. The Covid-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for the adoption and utilization of e-learning tools and the implementation of agile work models in Italian municipalities. It emphasized the importance of digital readiness, remote collaboration, and continuous learning, pushing municipalities to invest in digital infrastructure and prioritize the development of skills needed for agile work environments in the context of the Italian "smart working". In that context, small peripheral municipalities are also becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of lifelong learning and e-learning.

CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES TO AGILITY

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Many municipalities and especially the small-sized municipalities in the three countries are often rooted in traditional organizational models.

These municipalities are dealing with basic infrastructure challenges as well as lack of financial resources necessary to foster lifelong learning, skill enhancement, including transition towards agile operation and digitization of working processes and services. Furthermore, due to "brain drain" these municipalities often lack skilled workforce to support the implementation of agile and digital transition. For example, in Greece, due to similar issue, the implementation of the "Smart Cities" program was

hampered by a shortage of skilled workers for cutting-edge technology like "internet of things" (IoT), "artificial intelligence" (AI), and data analytics.

Another challenge to agility, "smart working" and digitization, is maintenance and upgrade of the e-learning platforms, including of other web-based or mobile applications (North Macedonia).

Sustainability of these applications and platforms is again determined by the financial resources needed for maintenance and upgrade of the software, including for the ICT professionals needed.

Another challenge to agility is lack of knowledge, distrust in novelties, lack of consistency, lack of interest to invest in agile training and certification, to adapt to change, as well as, unequal local development and centralization of policies and projects.

SKILLS NEEDED FOR AGILE AND SMART WORKING

5.1. LIST OF DIGITAL SKILLS FOR CIVIL SERVANTS

According to the respondents, civil servants should have:

- ☑ Knowledge of collaborative work tools and softwares, such as, Google Suit or Microsoft Office 365, project and workflow management tools such as, Asana, Slack, Trello, Miro, and document sharing platforms.

- ☑ Proficiency in using communication tools: email, chat, video conferencing through Zoom, MS Team and others.

- ☑ Ability to create digital content.

- ☑ Understanding of cyber security.

5.2. LIST OF SOFT SKILLS FOR CIVIL SERVANTS

Although many of the skills listed below are similar to the skills required for most of the position for civil servants, being mentioned by respondents in this context, only highlights their importance. Hence, some of the recommendations are:

- ☑ communication skills
- ☑ team work
- ☑ problem solving
- ☑ time management
- ☑ critical thinking
- ☑ service-oriented
- ☑ creativity
- ☑ adaptability
- ☑ stress management
- ☑ autonomy and responsibility &c.

5.3. LIST OF GREEN SKILLS FOR CIVIL SERVANTS

Since municipalities not only strive to maintain stability and adapt to changes, but to become greener and more sustainable, municipal leaders and civil servants should also work to transition towards green and agile workforce. In that direction, they would need knowledge in:

- ☑ energy efficiency;
- ☑ waste management;
- ☑ management of air pollution;
- ☑ water protection;
- ☑ protection of green spaces;
- ☑ protection of natural resources;
- ☑ sustainable mobility;
- ☑ mapping of green jobs
- ☑ green economy;
- ☑ stimulation of green jobs

E-LEARNING TOOLS AND PRACTICES

6

6.1. LIST OF EXAMPLES FROM ITALY

Cyber security in the Public Administration by FormezPA course from 2021, created in collaboration with FormezPA with main purpose to raise awareness of cyber security in the Public Administration.

Digital skills for public administration personnel by FPA Digital School - a platform for training on digital skills and innovation, created for companies and public administrations. It offers various multimedia tools such as video clips, tutorials, webinars.

Skills for ecological transition by FPA - offers modular training on green skills for green transition of municipalities.

Transversal and managerial skills by FPA - offers courses such as smart leadership, project management and other.

Video academy on Performance and Wellbeing in the PA by FPA Digital School and Forum PA 2022 - offers training for stress management, burnout, emotional and mental well-being of individuals and teams.

6.2. LIST OF EXAMPLES FROM GREECE

For few years, Municipality of Keratsini-Drapetsona's services are implementing the **"IRIDA" Information System for Electronic Document Management** which is a web-based application that contributed to digital skills enhancement of civil servants.

The **e-Lifelong Learning Centres** established for adult education in the Central Greece and South Aegean with support of the European Union (European Social Fund) and National Funds. The centers helped in enhancement of digital, soft and green skills of municipal employees from these regions so that, they can respond to the needs of local residents.

The **SmartDevOps** Project co-funded by the Erasmus+, offered digital skills training for 10 Municipalities in Central Greece (the Municipalities of Veroia, Volos, Grevena, Ioannina, Karditsa, Katerini, Kozani, Lamia, Larissa and Trikala) through MOOC Platform.

Many of the research and capacity building activities of **Municipality of Lamia**. Lamia as one of the top small smart cities in Europe and a member of the Open & Agile Smart Cities network. The municipality is committed to integration of smart city solutions as well as the continual modernization and digitization of its public services and civil servants skills and competences.

6.3. E-LEARNING IN NORTH MACEDONIA

The first modular e-learning for civil servants was launched in September 2013. It offered modular e-training in the area of strategic thinking, change management, problem solving and customer service.
The pilot initiative was launched as part of the public administration reforms led by the Ministry of Information Society and Administration and with the support of the British Embassy in Skopje.

Other positive examples that require further support, development and popularization are:

- the **E-TRAINING** platform of the Ministry for generic training.

- the **NALAS e-ACADEMY** for South East Europe and funded by the World Bank.

- **OPSTINSKI** established to support the local councils with support from Swiss Government, Ministry of LGs and UNDP.

- **ZELS** training program for municipalities organized by the Association of the Units of Local Self-Governmnet

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to increase awareness and understanding, including trust in the "agility" model or approach, the term "agility", either as "remote working" or as a concept of agile municipalities and institutions, needs to be further explored, openly discussed, agreed and popularized among local experts, leaders and civil servants.

In order to ensure that small and peripheral municipalities are not excluded from the transformative processes, as well as to ensure consistency, commitment and longevity of the "agility" needs to come through a national consensus or agreement of local even central institutions.

Once agreed and popularized, agility needs to be supported through an agility framework, a strategy and/or plan to ensure that necessary infrastructure is in place, responsible

bodies, feedback and monitoring systems.

Municipalities and civil servants must commit to continuous learning, to building institutional memory and to encourage knowledge sharing by making training available to all civil servants, by continuous improvement of courses, through offering e-learning, peer-to-peer learning, mentoring, study visits and all other means.

Municipalities must establish agile management support structure that will provide institutional, technical, and contractual assistance for agile processes and operations.

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www.fpadigitalschool.digital360.it
www.e-obuki.mioa.gov.mk
www.nalas-academy.com
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