

Straight or Crooked: The Future Path of Philippine Public Administration in the Digital Age

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To move forward is to confront uncertainty; to embrace change is to accept risk. For Philippine public administration, the digital age is not merely an invitation to modernize but a test of institutional will. The country now stands at a crossroads. One leads toward responsive, inclusive, transparent, and citizen-centered governance. The other bends toward stagnation, exclusion, technological dependency, and recurring administrative failure. This essay argues that Philippine public administration will travel the crooked path if digital transformation remains reactive, fragmented, and inequitable. It can move along the straight path only when technology is guided by strategic vision, institutional competence, democratic accountability, and social justice.

Digital technology has transformed the very conditions under which governments operate. Public service is no longer confined to physical offices, paper-based transactions, and slow bureaucratic procedures. It now increasingly depends on databases, online platforms, automated systems, artificial intelligence, and networked infrastructure. In this context, digital transformation is not a decorative reform or a temporary administrative trend; it is a structural requirement of contemporary governance. Yet the Philippine public sector has often treated digitalization as a collection of isolated projects rather than as a

comprehensive transformation of administrative systems, institutional culture, and state-citizen relations.

This fragmented approach reveals a deeper weakness: the absence of a coherent, enforceable, and citizen-centered digital governance strategy. Government agencies may launch online portals, mobile applications, or automated services, but these initiatives often suffer from weak interoperability, poor continuity, limited accessibility, and insufficient public feedback. As a result, digitalization risks becoming performative. It allows institutions to appear modern without necessarily becoming more responsive, transparent, or accountable. A slow, opaque, and exclusionary bureaucracy does not become efficient simply because it has migrated online. If old inefficiencies are merely transferred to digital platforms, technology becomes not a solution but a polished version of the same administrative failure.

The most serious concern is inequality. In a country marked by uneven development, the digital divide exposes the limits of e-governance. Citizens with stable internet access, digital devices, and technological literacy may benefit from faster and more convenient transactions. Meanwhile, those without such resources remain excluded. This produces a troubling paradox: digital government, intended to democratize access, may instead privilege those already advantaged. In rural, remote, and geographically isolated communities, unreliable connectivity, poverty, and limited digital literacy make online services inaccessible or intimidating. The citizen may no longer be separated from government only by distance, queues, or office hours, but by bandwidth, device ownership, and technical competence. If left unaddressed, digitalization will become efficient for the connected and exclusionary for the marginalized.

Institutional capacity is another critical weakness. Many public administrators still lack sufficient technological skills to maximize digital tools for service delivery, data management, policy analysis, and inter-agency coordination. This skills gap proves that digital transformation cannot be reduced to procurement. Governments often assume that purchasing technology is equivalent to reform. It is not. Technology without trained personnel, adaptive leadership, and organizational readiness becomes an expensive symbol of unrealized ambition. The problem is not only technical but cultural. Bureaucracies built around hierarchy, compliance, and routine often struggle to embrace experimentation, data literacy, collaboration, and responsiveness to feedback. Without cultural change, digital tools may simply automate inefficiency, preserve red tape in electronic form, and reinforce outdated patterns of administrative control.

The digital age also brings risks that Philippine public administration must confront with greater seriousness. Cyberattacks, data breaches, identity theft, misinformation, and privacy violations threaten not only technical systems but public trust itself. As more services become digitized, citizens are asked to entrust the state with personal and sensitive data. If the government fails to protect that data, the failure is not merely technological; it is democratic. Cybersecurity and data governance must therefore be treated as central pillars

of administrative legitimacy. At the same time, emerging technologies such as blockchain, artificial intelligence, and generative AI must not be romanticized. They may improve traceability, analysis, communication, and efficiency, but they cannot replace integrity, accountability, and political will. A corrupt procurement system will not become clean simply because it is digitized. A poorly designed welfare program will not become just simply because applications are submitted online. Technology magnifies the quality of the system into which it is introduced.

Thus, Philippine public administration must resist technological solutionism—the belief that complex institutional and social problems can be solved primarily through digital tools. Corruption, inefficiency, exclusion, and weak public trust are not merely technical problems; they are political and administrative problems. Digitalization can help expose and reduce them, but it cannot resolve them in isolation. The straight path requires technology to be embedded in broader reform. This means developing a coherent national digital governance roadmap, ensuring interoperability among agencies, strengthening data protection, expanding affordable and reliable connectivity, and designing services around citizens' real conditions. It also requires continuous digital literacy training, technical upskilling, ethical safeguards, and leadership committed not only to efficiency but to equity.

The ultimate measure of digital reform should not be the number of platforms launched, systems procured, or transactions automated. These are incomplete indicators of progress. The more meaningful question is whether digital transformation improves the lived experience of ordinary people. Can a farmer in a remote barangay access agricultural assistance without traveling long distances? Can a student from a poor household participate meaningfully in digital learning? Can a patient receive timely health information and support? Can an ordinary citizen transact with government without confusion, humiliation, or unnecessary delay? If the answer remains no, then digitalization has failed its public purpose.

The future of Philippine public administration is not predetermined by technology itself. It will be determined by governance choices. The crooked path is one where digitalization remains fragmented, exclusionary, insecure, and performative—a path where technology modernizes appearances while leaving deeper institutional weaknesses intact. The straight path, by contrast, demands inclusive infrastructure, competent personnel, ethical safeguards, inter-agency coordination, and political commitment to transparency and justice. In the digital age, the challenge is not simply to make government faster. A faster bureaucracy may still be unjust. A more automated system may still be exclusionary. A more technologically advanced state may still be unaccountable. The real challenge is to build a public administration that is not only efficient, but equitable; not only innovative, but ethical; not only digital, but democratic. Philippine public administration can travel the straight path, but only if it recognizes that technology is not the destination. It is merely a road. The direction must still be chosen by institutions, guided by public values, and judged by the people it claims to serve.