From paper-based administration to AI-driven workflow management at Harghita County Council: how crisis learning works and provides a foundation for further competence building

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Abstract: Scope and Objective
Most public sector organisations faced an unprecedented situation in the Covid-19 era, which fundamentally changed the way they worked and the digital tools they used. At Harghita County Council, a local authority in central Romania, digital tools had previously played a secondary role in core and support processes: although all official documents were created on computers, they were then printed, signed and stored on paper. There was only one e-signature facility (on behalf of the whole institution), and video calls were rare and had limited functionality. The proposed paper aims to analyse the adoption of digital tools for human resources management, first under the pressure of Covid-19 and then the subsequent, already parallel crises, between 2000 and 2024.
Methodology
The research is conducted using qualitative methods: participatory ethnography and semi-structured interviews.
Findings and Principal Conclusion
At the beginning of the period under study, digital transformation was almost a desperate attempt to find and implement workarounds for the immediate needs of human resource management in digital format (Skype and Discord calls, Zoom meetings, new electronic signatures). Later, in the post-Covid era, together with the implementation of the Common Assessment Framework, a structured programme of workflow standardisation has begun, leading to more potentially digitisable workflows. The current challenge for the institution is to adopt a technical ambidexterity: to keep all systems functioning and available for all activities, but also to implement the latest technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence, to cope with the increasing amount of data available in digital format. By presenting these three waves of digital transformation, the case serves as an illustration of "crisis learning": how new organisational capabilities were acquired in the COVID-19 era, which later became the basis for further actions and competence building to manage even polycrisis situations.