Opening the black box: Understanding the impact of digitization on the day-to-day work of public servants

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Abstract: Digital government has long been associated with expectations of improved efficiency and effectiveness in public administration. Yet empirical evidence on these effects remains lim-ited and inconclusive. This paper argues that a better understanding of digital reform out-comes requires opening the black box of everyday administrative work. Rather than treating public organizations as unitary actors, it examines how public servants interpret, use, and evaluate digital tools in their day-to-day work. Drawing on public reform research, technol-ogy acceptance models, and science and technology studies, the paper develops a micro-level perspective on digitization in public administration. Empirically, it is based on a quali-tative synthesis of 24 interviews with managers and employees from several German public administrations.

The findings show that public servants do not share a common understanding of digitization. Instead, digitization is interpreted in a pragmatic and artefact-centered way, primarily as the introduction of specific tools into existing routines. While digital tools are associated with expectations of efficiency, transparency, and modernization, their actual use remains closely shaped by hierarchical structures, established practices, and bureaucratic norms. Rather than producing broad organizational transformation, digitization often results in gradual adapta-tion, additional coordination work, and growing dependence on digital infrastructures. The paper contributes a micro-foundational perspective that helps explain why ambitious digital reform agendas frequently yield modest, uneven, and ambivalent outcomes in public organi-zations.