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► **To cite this version:**

Matti Schneider. Modernising the state through State Startups. European Public Mosaic, 2017, 2, pp.10. 10.2436/20.8080.03.2 . hal-01652147

**HAL Id: hal-01652147**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01652147>**

Submitted on 30 Nov 2017

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# Modernising the state through State Startups

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**“Digital transformation, in the context of public administration, can also be seen as an immense opportunity to regain the trust and involvement of citizens”**

## 1 The journey is the destination

Digital transformation is the term for a very profound change in how we design and deliver public services. It does not seek to compare pen and paper to keyboard and screen, but rather to contrast *computerisation* (automating what is already normalised) with *digitalisation* (making new practices emerge). Computerisation plans take power away from users, while digitalisation has the power to emancipate them (Schneider, 2017).

In itself, this is nothing specific to the public sector. However, in the context of public administration, it can also be seen as an immense opportunity to regain the trust and involvement of citizens by creating and maintaining shared services. It is important to realise that this kind of ‘transformation’ can never be fully achieved, for there is always a better way to collaborate and adapt to a changing world.

## 2 Finding the right path

There are many different paths to follow to start this never-ending transformation. Each one can fit a specific organisational context. In some cases, it is better to help an organisation evolve by focusing the attention of its members on its organisational structure. In others,

providing agents with a safe space to experiment and share can spark a change in the way of working that will be felt by the public. In yet other cases – perhaps those in which the agency’s goal is to produce data – the shift will start with a push to open some of its precious datasets, thereby enabling the discovery that more value is created with external users of that data than with yearly statistics on the produced data.

The French government’s **Secretariat-general for Government Modernisation** strives to effect this change by experimenting and providing support on all of these different directions simultaneously.

It co-created 12 local labs for 13 regions in France, akin to the Laboratorio de Gobierno (Chile) and the Policy Lab (UK). Coupled with the *100% contacts efficaces* initiative, which introduces agencies to user-centred design, these spaces bring together designers, public agents, coaches, and makers to experiment and open minds to what public services could be. Finally, *Étalab* is the task force responsible for open data, and it accompanies all agencies in opening up through advice, tooling and regulation.

A more recent mission is **beta.gouv.fr**, the Digital Services Incubator. It builds simple and transparent tools collaboratively and iteratively, which fix real daily problems and offers them on a free choice basis to agents and citizens. Its aim is to spread the culture of digital innovation throughout the administration. This is done through *State Startups*.

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### 3 Matching individuals with a vision

**“We hire developers, data scientists, designers, product managers an all necessary talent to solve real-world issues for real-world users”**

A State Startup is not just an oxymoron; it is the match between a team and a mission. There is no capital investment and no separate legal entity, only the usage of the tools and practices of the digital start-ups to resolve friction in an interaction between an administration and citizens. We help it identify an ‘intrapreneur’, one of its civil servants ready to hustle their way into delivering a digital public service, and create a team of experts around them. We hire developers, data scientists, designers, product managers and all necessary talent, either under short-term contracts or as independent contractors, and coach that team so it stays laser-focused on solving real-world issues for real-world users. This team of two to four people will have six months to prove a digital product can improve the situation.

## 4 Demonstrating the viability of modern practices in the public sector

The new version of the French Open Data Portal ([data.gouv.fr](http://data.gouv.fr)) was the first State Startup to come into existence back in June 2013. Made publicly available in December that same year, it brought social features to a tool that used to be a catalogue of spreadsheets, like every other country at the time. The new interface created feedback loops from civil society, that could now publish reuses, towards the institutions producing data, thus allowing them to increase the quality of their datasets by leveraging the crowd. Being open-source, this tool is now used in other countries such as Luxembourg, and is transferring capabilities EU-wide.

Another example is *Mes Aides*, a web application that helps citizens know which benefits they are entitled to. The problem addressed is citizens not claiming benefits they are eligible to due to the complexity of the law. As a matter of fact, in 2012, up to 80% of French citizens eligible for financial help for health insurance did not request it (Guthmuller et al, 2011). A State Startup was incubated in February 2014 and made a service publicly available at [mesaides.gouv.fr](http://mesaides.gouv.fr) in September. Two years later, over 1,200 individuals now assess their eligibility for 25 social benefits daily, **in under 7 minutes** for the majority. A large-scale evaluation of this service led by independent researchers with controlled cohorts is currently underway. We were able to scale this





product thanks to strong collaboration between different government agencies and the wider public. We started with seven target benefits and only 70 tests provided by partner agencies. We now compute 25 benefits and have over 600 tests on baseline and edge **cases** provided by new partner agencies and overseas territories, NGOs who use the tool on a daily basis, and even individuals in specific situations.

Once again, by opening the code powering this service, powerful opportunities were enabled. New governmental services use the same computation engine independently from the Incubator to target specific sectors of the **population**. During the **Open Government Partnership Global Summit hackathon**, teams of four made tax law computable

for countries such as **Tunisia** and **Senegal** in under 48 hours. We have recently been contacted by the City of Barcelona, which also wants to offer a social benefits estimator and intends to base it on OpenFisca.

Such open tools can evolve beyond their original scope. Another service incubated at beta.gouv.fr uses that same engine to provide an embeddable widget that computes the cost of hiring an **employee**, with all taxes and refunds included, with a single line of code. The first public version of that tool was once again delivered in under six months with just one full-time employee. It is now used in over eight different partner websites: administrations, start-ups and SMEs alike.

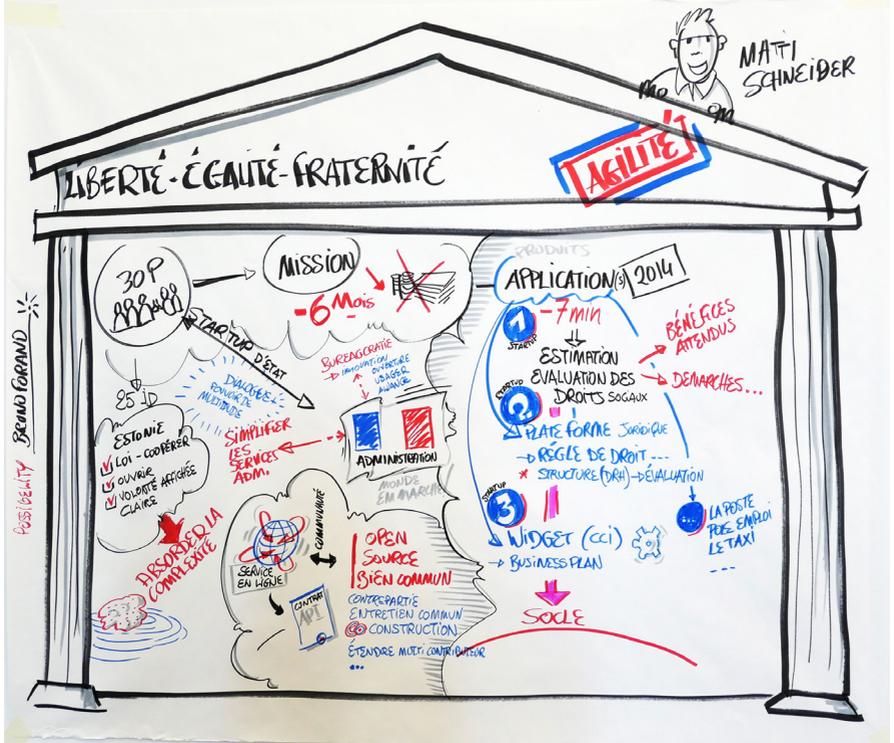
## 5 Implementing a strategy

Our continued growth, 36 products at the time of writing, and our increasing number of partner ministries all prove that building digital services for and with the public, ensuring collaboration across government agencies and beyond, and ignoring usual committee-based, siloed decision-making yields greatly improved services at a fraction of the cost and fosters interest and support from civil society.

We have learnt that the most effective strategy in digital transformation is delivery. Rather than trying to convince other stakeholders – be they fellow administrations, the private sector, or individuals – to work towards a specific goal, it is more efficient to simply *start working on it* while simultaneously

**“We have learnt that the most effective strategy in digital transformation is delivery. It is more efficient to *start working on it* rather than trying to convince other stakeholders”**





opening up as many opportunities for contribution as possible. As feedback is truly listened to and acted upon, a community starts shaping itself and the power of the crowd is leveraged. That support can then be shifted into resources, but also into political power to support larger transformation efforts by convincing more reluctant actors to consider digital transformation as an opportunity rather than a challenge. Efficiency, collaboration and openness become both tools and goals when one focuses on delivery, reinforcing themselves and each other at every step and leading ever more towards a continuously renewed 'digital transformation'. ■

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