

Combating the Culture of Red Tape in the Philippines Through Digital Governance Reform

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Abstract: The Philippine public sector has historically been burdened by a deeply entrenched culture of red tape, characterized by manual paperwork, procedural redundancies, and persistent service delays. While digitalization has emerged as a transformative mechanism to combat these systemic inefficiencies, the extent to which it successfully disrupts traditional bureaucratic norms remains underexplored from the perspective of frontline implementers. Anchored on the Technology Acceptance Model, this study investigates the practices utilized to dismantle the culture of red tape and the systemic challenges encountered during this digital transition. An exploratory qualitative design was employed, involving one-on-one interviews with 20 government employees directly engaged in customer service operations in Bulacan, Philippines. Data analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis reveal that digital tools effectively disrupt manual redundancy and eradicate the traditional "come back tomorrow" culture through real-time processing and decentralized service access. However, the study also identifies significant cultural and operational friction. Infrastructural fragility, a persistent digital divide among the citizenry, and the resulting emotional burden on frontline staff frequently force temporary regressions back to manual intervention. Ultimately, the findings indicate that permanently dismantling the culture of governance red tape requires moving beyond mere software deployment; it demands resilient technological infrastructure, targeted public digital inclusivity programs, and comprehensive institutional change management..

Keywords: Digital Governance, Red Tape, Technology Acceptance Model, Philippine Bureaucracy, Public Service Reform

Introduction

Public sector governance has historically been challenged by a deeply entrenched culture of red tape, marked by manual paperwork, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and prolonged procedural delays, prompting the need for digital governance to combat these systemic issues (Gupta, Singh, & Bhaskar, 2020). In the Philippines and similar developing contexts, digitalization has emerged as a transformative force aimed at dismantling these traditional systems to ensure operational continuity, efficiency, and responsiveness to citizen needs (Ndou, 2020; Heeks, 2018). Digital innovations have redefined how institutions adapt to online systems, significantly improving productivity and reducing procedural redundancies (Chavez & Lamorinas, 2023). Furthermore, government-initiated digital support programs have proven crucial in mitigating economic challenges during crises, underscoring the value of technology in fostering institutional resilience and optimizing decision-making (Chavez, Del Prado, & Estoque, 2023). However, defining and implementing this digital transformation requires a comprehensive approach that moves beyond mere digitization to fundamentally alter public administration structures (Mergel, Edelmann, & Haug, 2019; Ali & Ghoneim, 2020).

Combating this culture of red tape requires integrating digital tools into policy compliance and public service innovation. Digital communication channels and databases enhance monitoring, reporting efficiency, and organizational compliance, such as with the Magna Carta for women

employees (Chavez, Gregorio, Araneta, & Bihag, 2024). Strengthening legal and procedural awareness among employees through these tools significantly reduces miscommunication and administrative delays (Bucoy et al., 2024). This transformation extends to public leadership; young public leaders who adopt digital engagement strategies improve their responsiveness to community needs (Chavez, Garil, Padirque, et al., 2024). Similarly, technological tools help leaders enhance stakeholder engagement, demonstrating the necessity of effective communication delivery and digital skills in modern leadership contexts (Garil, Entong, Muarip, et al., 2024). In the realm of customer

service, maintaining the "Filipino brand" of cultural sensitivity and responsiveness demands adaptability to online systems (Mendoza, 2023). The use of digital record systems and compliance monitoring platforms—such as those observed in local industries like halal food and accommodation in the Zamboanga Peninsula—has been shown to enhance credibility, standardize service quality, and streamline customer relations (Chavez & Vicente, 2024).

However, the shift toward digital governance frequently encounters barriers that stem from employee adaptation, system usability, and the general acceptance of digital tools, rather than merely technological limitations. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Davis (1989), provides a vital theoretical lens for understanding this required behavioral shift. TAM posits that technology adoption depends on perceived usefulness—the belief that technology enhances job performance—and perceived ease of use—the belief that the technology is effortless to operate (Davis, 1989). When government employees perceive digital systems positively across these variables, they are more likely to adopt them effectively; conversely, weak perceptions can reinforce existing inefficiencies. Building digital capacity in public organizations through targeted employee training and change management is essential for navigating this transition (Kettunen & Kallio, 2021). Ultimately, a well-designed e-government platform that prioritizes usability is critical for enhancing citizen satisfaction and overcoming institutional resistance (Chen, Li, & Zhang, 2021).

Despite its advantages, this transition faces notable ethical, operational, and infrastructural challenges. The use of artificial intelligence and digital systems presents ethical dilemmas and data management issues that necessitate governance frameworks capable of balancing innovation with strict accountability (Chavez, Cuilan, Mannan, et al., 2024; Janssen & van den Hoven, 2020). Furthermore, communication patterns in digital environments significantly shape customer perceptions and trust, underscoring the importance of data privacy and transparency (Cuilan, Chavez, Soliva, et al., 2024; Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2019).

While numerous studies explore e-governance and digital transformation, a noticeable research gap exists concerning how digitalization specifically combats the culture of governance red tape from the perspective of frontline government employees. Most existing research focuses heavily on citizens' satisfaction and accessibility, largely overlooking the lived experiences and challenges of the employees who interact directly with these digital platforms. This exploratory study seeks to fill this gap by examining how digitalization practices are applied to simplify bureaucratic procedures and enhance customer service delivery. Anchored on TAM, the research explores the relationship between technological innovation and public sector performance by focusing on employees' perceived usefulness and ease of use of digital tools. Ultimately, this research aims to uncover practical insights into the factors influencing technology acceptance, offering strategies to guide administrators in promoting greater efficiency and permanently dismantling the entrenched culture of red tape in public service.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to examine how digitalization is utilized to combat the entrenched culture of governance red tape and transform customer services in Philippine government institutions. An exploratory approach was deemed appropriate to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences and behavioral adaptations in relation to digital governance systems. Through open-ended interviews, the study aimed to generate detailed insights

into the specific practices that disrupt traditional, delay-prone bureaucratic processes, as well as the systemic challenges encountered when attempting to implement digital platforms in public service delivery.

Population and Sampling

The participants of the study were 20 government employees from Bulacan, Philippines, who are directly involved in customer service operations across various departments. These employees were selected using purposive sampling, as they possess firsthand experience navigating the transition from traditional, paper-heavy bureaucratic systems to modern digital tools. The sample included personnel from administrative, frontline, and technical units to capture diverse perspectives on how digitalization affects cultural shifts in procedural efficiency and citizen interaction. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed of the study's purpose and assured of strict confidentiality.

Instrument

The study utilized a semi-structured interview guide developed based on the revised research objectives. It focused on two key areas: (1) digitalization practices that disrupt the culture of governance red tape, and (2) systemic and operational challenges in adopting digitalization for customer services. The first part explored how digital tools dismantle traditional administrative bottlenecks and influence governance efficiency. The second part examined the friction points where the old bureaucratic culture clashes with new digital expectations, and the resulting effects on customer service. The interview guide underwent expert validation to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives before data collection. Table 1 presents the updated guide questions used in this research.

Table 1. Interview guide questions.

Objectives	Interview question
To examine digitalization practices aimed at combating the culture of governance red tape..	1. How are digital tools applied to disrupt traditional, delay-prone governance processes? 2. What specific bureaucratic bottlenecks or manual procedures have been dismantled through digitalization? 3. How do these digital practices shift the culture of efficiency and transparency in government transactions?
To identify cultural and operational challenges in utilizing digitalization for customer services.	1. What cultural, technical, or systemic difficulties do you encounter when utilizing digital platforms for public services? 2. How do these technological and behavioral friction points affect the citizen customer service experience? 3. What strategic measures could address these challenges to ensure sustainable digital reform?

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted either in person or via online platforms, depending on the participants' availability and institutional protocols. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with explicit consent to ensure the accuracy of transcription. The researcher utilized the interview guide to ensure all relevant aspects of the bureaucratic transition were covered, while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions to explore deeper systemic issues. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained, and participants were briefed on the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). This method involves an iterative process of familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, and interpretation. Interview transcripts were first reviewed and coded manually to identify recurring ideas and behavioral patterns related to the disruption of traditional governance and digital service delivery. The initial codes were then grouped into broader themes reflecting the key practices, cultural shifts, and persistent challenges of digitalization in the Philippine bureaucracy. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis by acknowledging the researcher's interpretations and perspectives in meaning-making. Direct quotations from participants were used to support the identified themes and ensure the authenticity of the frontline employees' lived experiences.

Results

Research Objective 1: To examine digitalization practices aimed at combating the culture of governance red tape.

Dismantling Manual Redundancy and Paper-Heavy Bureaucracy

The traditional Philippine bureaucratic culture is heavily defined by manual paperwork, repetitive form-filling, and physical document storage. Participants revealed that digital tools—specifically online registration portals and automated databases—serve as primary disruptors of these entrenched practices. By shifting the initial point of contact to online platforms, frontline employees no longer act as mere data encoders. This transition eradicates the necessity for citizens to physically queue just to submit preliminary paperwork, simultaneously preventing the manual accumulation of documents that historically clogged administrative offices and delayed service delivery.

"Digitalization has allowed us to break away from the traditional, paper-heavy system. Before, transactions were entirely manual, and it would take several days to process even simple requests because of the sheer volume of paperwork. Now, the system automatically stores and updates citizen records, cutting down the bureaucratic red tape."

"We no longer have to force citizens to rewrite the same information on five different forms. Because the data is stored in the system, it reduces the manual redundancy that used to consume our entire shift. This saves office resources and gives us more time to focus on assisting clients with complex, special cases that actually require human judgment."

Eradicating the "Come Back Tomorrow" Culture Through Real-Time Processing

A hallmark of governance red tape is the physical routing of documents between different departments, often resulting in citizens being repeatedly told to "come back tomorrow." The data indicates that digitalization combats this culture through inter-agency electronic verification and real-time transaction tracking. By directly verifying documents with partner institutions (such as hospitals, schools, and banks) and utilizing digital status logs, government employees bypass the traditional, multi-step physical verification processes. This instantaneous access to information breaks the cycle of endless citizen follow-ups and significantly accelerates transaction turnaround times.

"We can now verify documents electronically with partner institutions like hospitals and schools. It eliminates the traditional hassle where citizens had to travel back and forth just to submit supporting papers. We no longer have to tell them to 'come back tomorrow' or 'wait for the routing' because we can confirm the authenticity of their records almost instantly."

"Everything is recorded in the system, which completely disrupts the old culture of endless waiting. Citizens can follow up online instead of going from one physical window to another. In the past, we had to call or walk to different departments just to find out where a document was stuck. Today, the system makes the entire process transparent and holds the specific processing desk accountable."

Decentralizing Service Access and Securing Institutional Integrity

The reliance on physical, centralized government offices for all transactions historically created massive bottlenecks and vulnerabilities, including lost files and financial discrepancies. Participants highlighted that online payment gateways and digital cloud archiving decentralize access, allowing citizens to bypass office congestion entirely. Furthermore, this shift mitigates the risks associated with manual cash handling and vulnerable paper archives. By removing the physical exchange of cash and papers, these digital systems reduce opportunities for corruption, standardize the payment process, and ensure that institutional records are secure from both physical degradation and unauthorized tampering.

"Payments for government fees can now be done online, which drastically reduces foot traffic in the office and minimizes the risks associated with manual cash handling. It removes the traditional bottlenecks at payment counters and lessens the opportunities for under-the-table transactions because every receipt is generated and recorded instantly."

"We used to handle tons of vulnerable paper records, which were prone to getting lost in the shuffle or damaged by wear and tear. Storing permits and documents digitally not only speeds up retrieval but secures the public's data. It brings a new level of integrity to our records, though it does require us to be much more vigilant about data privacy and cybersecurity."

Research Objective 2: To identify cultural and operational challenges in utilizing digitalization for customer services.

Infrastructural Fragility and the Ripple Effect of Downtimes

The disruption of traditional bureaucracy is heavily dependent on robust digital infrastructure. Participants noted that unstable internet connections and sudden system crashes immediately halt the new digital workflow. When the infrastructure fails, the resulting bottlenecks replicate the very red tape the system was designed to eliminate, causing severe delays across interconnected departments. To sustain the digital transition, respondents emphasized the critical need for resilient backup systems, dedicated high-speed connections, and offline encoding capabilities to ensure continuity of service.

"Unstable internet in the office is one of the biggest challenges we face in delivering digital services. When the system slows down or suddenly goes offline, our entire workflow is disrupted and transactions come to a halt."

"Most problems come from sudden platform downtimes that disrupt operations across multiple offices at once. When this happens, we have to resort to offline methods temporarily, which means more manual work and longer processing times. It essentially brings back the old delays."

"To address this, there should be a reliable backup system that can automatically take over when the main platform fails. Securing dedicated high-speed lines and having an offline encoding option will allow us to process requests even without the internet and simply sync them once the system is restored."

The Digital Divide and the Persistence of Manual Intervention

The shift away from a paper-heavy culture assumes a level of technological readiness among the public that does not universally exist. Frontline employees observed a significant digital divide, particularly among senior citizens and clients from rural areas who lack digital literacy or access to smart devices. Consequently, employees are forced to manually guide these citizens through the digital process—such as creating email accounts on the spot. This ironically slows down the service queue and forces staff back into a manual intervention role, hindering the overall efficiency of the digital rollout.

"Many citizens, especially senior citizens or those from rural areas, are not very familiar with using digital platforms. In some cases, they don't even have email accounts, which are required for certain transactions. This means we have to assist them in creating accounts on the spot before proceeding."

"While we understand their situation, this lack of digital readiness takes additional time and slows down the overall flow of transactions. When the system lags or when we spend time hand-holding clients through the portal, lines pile up fast, causing long delays even for the simplest transactions."

Frontline Friction and the Emotional Burden of Systemic Change

The transitional friction between the old bureaucratic expectations and the new digital reality places a profound emotional and operational burden on frontline staff. When technical failures occur, employees bear the brunt of public frustration, effectively absorbing the citizens' anger over the interrupted service. Managing these emotional escalations consumes valuable time that could otherwise be spent processing transactions. Participants highlighted that mitigating this friction requires clear, proactive public communication strategies to manage citizen expectations during system outages.

"Whenever the digital platform fails, we are forced to handle not just the technical disruption but also the emotional weight of the situation. Even though the root cause is a technical problem, people often direct their anger at frontline staff, which affects public trust in the service."

"We're trying to remain calm and professional even when we're equally stressed and frustrated about the system failure. Over time, these moments can be mentally exhausting, and it slows down the flow of transactions because a significant amount of time is spent managing emotions instead of actually processing requests."

"Clear and proactive communication, such as automated announcements or text alerts, can help manage client expectations and reduce confusion. A real-time ticketing or queueing update system can help manage crowds by letting citizens know how long the wait is, easing the pressure on us."

Discussion

This study explored how digitalization serves as a strategic mechanism to combat the entrenched culture of governance red tape in the Philippines, while also examining the systemic friction experienced by frontline employees during this transition. The findings are best understood through the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which posits that the successful adoption of new systems relies heavily on perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Davis, 1989). In the context of the Philippine bureaucracy, this behavioral shift represents more than just software adoption; it is a fundamental disruption of traditional public administration structures and long-standing procedural norms (Mergel, Edelmann, & Haug, 2019; Ali & Ghoneim, 2020).

The findings reveal that digital tools effectively dismantle the systemic tolerance for bureaucratic delays. By replacing physical document routing with real-time electronic verification and online portals, the public sector directly challenges the historical "come back tomorrow" culture (Gupta, Singh, & Bhaskar, 2020). From a TAM perspective, employees exhibited a high perception of usefulness regarding these tools, noting that digital databases not only accelerate transactions but enforce strict transparency and organizational compliance (Chavez, Gregorio, Araneta, & Bihag, 2024; Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2019). Furthermore, decentralizing service access through online payments removes the vulnerabilities associated with physical cash handling and localized paper archives. This shift standardizes service quality, forcing the "Filipino brand" of customer service to evolve from personality-driven, localized interactions to equitable, transparent, and highly regulated digital standards (Mendoza, 2023; Chavez & Vicente, 2024).

Despite the high perceived usefulness of digital systems, the study identified significant cultural and operational friction that severely impacts perceived ease of use. A major barrier is the persistent digital divide among the citizenry, particularly affecting senior citizens and rural populations (Ndou, 2020). When citizens lack digital literacy, the intended autonomy of e-governance fails, forcing frontline employees to revert to manual intervention—such as creating email accounts for clients on the spot. This ironic regression highlights that technological solutions cannot succeed in a vacuum; they must account for the actual technological readiness of the user base. Without targeted adaptation and inclusivity programs, digital transformation risks isolating vulnerable populations rather than serving them (Chavez, Del Prado, & Estoque, 2023).

The most critical challenge identified by frontline employees was infrastructural fragility. The data shows that when internet connectivity fluctuates or platforms crash, the system instantly regresses to traditional, delay-prone bureaucracy. This dependency underscores that combating red tape is

impossible without first securing robust information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure (Heeks, 2018). These downtimes do more than halt transactions; they severely damage public trust and place immense emotional strain on frontline staff who must manage citizen frustration. During these operational crises, transparent and proactive communication strategies become paramount to managing customer perceptions and preserving institutional credibility (Cuilan, Chavez, Soliva, et al., 2024; Garil, Entong, Muarip, et al., 2024).

To ensure that the disruption of governance red tape is permanent, public institutions must move beyond mere digitization and invest heavily in building internal digital capacity. This requires comprehensive employee training and change management frameworks that empower staff to navigate both the technical and emotional demands of the digital frontline (Kettunen & Kallio, 2021). Furthermore, sustaining this cultural shift requires responsive public leadership that champions digital engagement while actively addressing community needs (Chavez, Garil, Padirque, et al., 2024). Ultimately, dismantling the culture of red tape necessitates governance frameworks that balance rapid technological innovation with strict accountability, ethical data management, and user-centric design (Janssen & van den Hoven, 2020; Chavez, Cuilan, Mannan, et al., 2024; Chen, Li, & Zhang, 2021).

Conclusion

Dismantling the Philippine culture of red tape requires a fundamental behavioral shift rather than mere software deployment. Digitalization acts as the strict catalyst for this disruption, forcing institutional accountability and eradicating the historical reliance on manual delays. Sustaining this structural transformation demands robust, resilient ICT infrastructure; without it, operational failures instantly resurrect the very bureaucratic bottlenecks the digital transition sought to destroy. Policymakers must actively bridge the digital divide to ensure all citizens can autonomously navigate e-governance platforms, preventing frontline staff from reverting to manual intervention roles. Permanent governance reform hinges on empowering public servants through continuous capacity-building and championing ethical, user-centered digital leadership to definitively sever the bureaucracy's ties to its delay-prone, paper-heavy past.

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