Questioning hierarchies:
Senior leaders' views on how global civil services changed during the pandemic

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic required dramatic changes and new ways of working from civil services around the world. Within this, the immediate pandemic response and shift to remote work have captured most attention, but there has been less analysis of the other ways in which civil services adapted, or of how these changes have shaped the post-pandemic reform agenda. To gain insight on these questions, we interviewed 14 heads of civil service (or other similarly senior officials) from countries on all six continents to understand how they interpret the transformations that have occurred, what they are doing to institutionalise and deepen them, and what they perceive as the next frontiers for change.

We find that the pandemic imposed a dual imperative on civil services: the need for greater speed, flexibility, and decentralisation of decision-making on the one hand, and for greater coordination and collaboration on the other. These two imperatives sat in tension with each other and led them to make a range of changes, many of which revolved around the common theme of questioning, unpacking, and remaking the traditionally hierarchical structures and norms of their institutions. The specific changes made varied across countries and spanned from the adoption of agile ways of working to the creation of new coordination mechanisms, the adoption of new modes and styles of leadership, and intensified training systems focusing on a broader scope of skills. Senior leaders viewed these changes mainly as an acceleration of pre-existing trends rather than as new ideas, and saw technology as an enabler but not a driver of change.

Looking past the emergency response phase of the pandemic, leaders are not unanimous in their views on which of these changes are likely to be permanent. However, many perceive an urgent need to change structural aspects of people management and leadership development – from training to personnel evaluation and career management – in order to resolve the challenges and tensions that emerged in this process, and this effort dominates their thinking about institutionalising and continuing change in the medium- to long-term.

QUESTIONING HIERARCHIES: SENIOR LEADERS' VIEWS ON HOW GLOBAL CIVIL SERVICES CHANGED DURING THE PANDEMIC

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic forced civil services worldwide to rapidly change how they work. However, most discussion has focused on governments' short-term reactions to the crisis, with less consideration of whether and how these changes will persist and shape the longer-term trajectory of the management of people and processes in the public sector.

To better understand this, the People in Government Lab conducted interviews with the heads of civil services and other similarly senior leaders from 14 countries on six continents. While the perceptions of senior leaders have some limitations and potential biases as a data source, they also have special significance since these leaders have been uniquely placed to witness the changes sparked by the pandemic. These individuals are also the leading actors shaping current and future change trends, based in large part on their experiences and interpretations of these events.

Two main trends emerge from our interviews. First, the pandemic forced bureaucracies both to act more quickly and to greatly increase the intensity and scope of horizontal collaboration and coordination across institutions and sectors. In most cases, senior leaders view these changes as an acceleration of pre-existing trends towards further agility and whole-of-government thinking. Indeed, the imperative of emergency service delivery often provided an impetus to go forward with pre-existing reform ideas that had been parked, rather than sparking new reform directions.

Second, the tension between these imperatives – greater speed and flexibility on one hand, and greater coordination on the other – required bureaucracies to question and rethink their internal processes and how their hierarchies function internally. There was a push to decentralise some types of decisions in order to act quickly, but this placed an even higher premium on communication and coordination, all of which sat uneasily with traditional bureaucratic modes of operation. Leaders were learning by doing and forced to adapt by increasing agility of decision-making and supervision, while simultaneously giving civil servants more autonomy and making communication routines more inclusive.

Senior leaders' views are not unanimous in viewing these changes as being here to stay as the extent of changes varies across cases, and is more feasible in some countries/environments than others. However, many perceive an urgent need to change structural aspects of people management – from training to personnel evaluation and career management – in order to resolve the challenges and tensions that emerged in this process. While some initial steps in this direction have been taken by many governments, whether these efforts continue will determine whether steps taken as emergency

responses to the pandemic become long-term changes to ways of working.

While much writing about civil services' reactions to the pandemic has focused on the role of technology, in our interviews senior leaders perceived technology and digital tools primarily as facilitators and mediators – not drivers. While digitalisation has of course played a crucial role in these transformations and will continue to do so, the interviews make clear that the most fundamental transformations were in the management of people and organisational processes. The use of technology and digital tools thus appear in senior leaders' narratives of adaption and future reform directions as an enabler, not a driver or goal in itself.

In this report, we discuss and illustrate these perceived trends, and lay out a set of challenges that senior leaders worldwide will face if they wish to institutionalise the positive aspects of these *ad hoc* transformations and to address their risks. In focusing our study on the medium- to long-term rather than on the immediate reaction to the pandemic and gathering data on the perceptions of a small but extremely influential and diverse group of senior leaders, this report complements other research conducted on how the pandemic has affected civil services worldwide. These include roundtables and expert discussions of the rapid shift to remote working and pandemic-related decision-making (e.g. OECD, 2021; Pizarro et al., 2021), large-scale surveys of public employees (e.g. United Kingdom Civil Service People Survey, 2021; Roseth et al., 2021; Schuster and Kay, 2021), and experimental interventions related to these new ways of working (e.g. Gómez et al., 2022). We therefore hope that this report provides new insights into how the senior leaders of these institutions experienced and interpret these events and how they have shaped longer-term reform directions and ideas.

The following section briefly explains our methodology (with additional details contained in appendices to the report). Section 3 presents the changes in governments' functioning induced by the emergence of a dual imperative of greater coordination and need for speed and flexibility in the context of the pandemic. Section 4 highlights the role that leadership adaptation and training played in supporting and accompanying these changes. Section 5 lays out the next steps of the agenda of senior leaders who wish to capture the positive aspects of these *ad hoc* transformations and to address their risks. Section 6 concludes.

2. Interview sample and methodology

Interview recruitment methodology and sample details
This paper mainly uses primary data collected through semi-structured interviews with heads of civil services or similarly senior leaders around the world. We do our best to report their testimonies and perceptions faithfully, but also discuss them with a critical eye. In parallel, we draw on secondary data from extensive desk research on grey literature and governmental reports to inform and complement the analysis of our primary data collection.

The recruitment method used to reach out to government officials included three stages. First, we used direct targeting to identify the heads of civil services from different countries, aiming for a diverse sample representing both developed and developing countries on all continents. For this purpose, we mainly relied on the Blavatnik School of Government and REDES academic and professional networks. Second, after confirming the names and obtaining their contact details, we sent 18 heads of civil services an official invitation via email, introducing the study and asking for their participation. In cases in which the Head of Civil Service or equivalent was not available, we used snowball sampling for targeting and/or asked them to connect us with their direct subordinate or the person they considered would be better able to answer our questions. Third, we provided those who accepted to participate with an interview protocol as well as a consent form prior to conducting the interview via videocall. Interviews are all reported anonymously and were conducted between August 2021 and March 2022. Appendix A provides further details about the selection process.

The final sample of interviewees is constituted of 14 heads of civil services or senior leaders from countries on the six continents (Figure 1). Figure 2 highlights in red the countries of provenance of our interviewees (Figure 2). They are Ghana and Uganda on the African continent; Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Colombia and Chile in South America; the United States in North America; Singapore and Qatar in Asia; the United Kingdom and Spain in Europe; and Australia.

Figure 1: Categorisation of respondents by role type.

Respondents' role type	Number of respondents
Heads of Civil Service (e.g. Minister, Secretary, Chief Officer)	9
Directors of subunits within the Civil Service	2
Senior officials responsible for people management	2
Head of national public administration school	1

Source: Authors

Figure 2: Map of countries interviewed.

Source: Authors

Our choice of methodological approach responds to two main gaps in the academic and policy literature. First, by targeting specifically high-level public officials, we obtain highly valuable and unique primary data. It is very rare for studies to be able to interview this many highly placed officials, particularly from low- and middle-income countries that are traditionally underrepresented in public administration research (Bertelli et al., 2020). Second, our study's focus on the medium- to long-term time horizon (rather than on the immediate reaction to the pandemic) complements other research conducted on how the pandemic has affected civil services worldwide (e.g. Pizarro et al., 2021; Schuster and Kay, 2021) by giving leaders time to reflect on which aspects of these emergency responses are likely to stick. It also allows us to draw on newly released secondary data and government documents to contextualise officials' interview responses and complement the

qualitative results of the primary data collection.

While examining the perceptions of senior leaders thus has its advantages, it also entails obvious limitations. The first is the relatively small sample of very senior leaders it is possible for any one study to reach, and the risk that our network-driven convenience sample of countries may not be fully representative of the whole world. While our study includes a larger number of such senior officials from a wider range of countries than we are aware of in existing studies, this is nonetheless a limitation. A second key challenge of relying on senior leaders' perceptions is that leaders themselves may have biased or inaccurate views, or may omit certain information in order to paint a more positive picture of their civil services. We can address this to some extent by analysing interview responses with a critical lens and triangulating against other secondary literature, but our ability to do so is obviously limited. We therefore treat our interview data mainly as potentially subjective perceptions rather than unbiased facts, while emphasising that these perceptions themselves are very meaningful because they guide the actions of the influential individuals who hold them.

Structure and conduct of interviews

Interviews were approximately one hour long, conducted by two or three interviewers and semi-structured with an interview protocol indicating the main themes and topics sent to the participants in advance. The two main themes/sections of the protocol were: 1) challenges that civil services were tackling due to Covid-19 and how governments were responding to them, including questions on technological adoption, workplace rearrangement, and management practices; and 2) issues and opportunities of the mainstreaming of Covid-19-related changes and the implications for civil services in the mid- to long-term term future (i.e., approximately the next five years). Appendix B exhibits the full interview protocol.

Coding and analysis processes

We used multiple coding to analyse, interpret and systematise the qualitative data, following a conventional content analysis (Barbour, 2001; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The coding was led by one member of the research team using Nvivo, isolating themes and nodes from the different interview transcripts inductively, without using previously defined coding categories. This coding was then cross-checked and discussed by other research team members in order to reduce bias and ensure consistency of coding and interpretation (Appendix C for further detail). Codes were then iteratively updated as analysis and writing progressed.

3. New imperatives in the ways of working

SECTION KEY INSIGHTS

Covid-19 created a dual imperative
- Increased intensity and scope of collaboration and coordination
- Actors multiplied across sectoral, organisational, and departmental boundaries
- Simultaneous need for speed and flexibility led to need to decentralise many decisions

Tension between these two imperatives led to rethinking of decision-making processes
- Required strengthening of coordination mechanisms
- Questioning of traditional, hierarchical approach to decision-making

Covid-19 required bureaucracies to increase the intensity and scope of collaborations while enhancing their flexibility and responsiveness in fast-paced environments. Interviewees from all 14 countries emphasised that the pandemic response required a vast expansion of collaboration both among public organisations and with their private and civic counterparts, as highlighted in other studies (Mazzucato and Kattel, 2020; OECD, 2021). As one interviewee explained, this collaboration required alignment in processes across organisations: "One of the good things of the pandemic is that it forced us to do things that always were very hard to implement, such as database interoperability, sharing information between the different agencies and working in a collaborative manner, when the organisational tradition usually leads to jurisdictions solely looking at themselves." (Argentina interview).

At the same time, the response to the pandemic created demand for further flexibility and speed. Another interviewee highlighted these dual demands: "Our public service over the past 20 months had to orchestrate and put together many multi-agency operations. We had to, almost overnight, get agencies to pull resources, irrespective of organisational boundaries and some of the protocols we have in place. We have to override many of these things just to quickly respond to the crisis." (Singapore interview). The conflictual imperatives created by these demands of increased collaborations along with enhanced flexibility and speed have had important consequences for how various bureaucracies re-consider their coordination mechanisms as well as internal hierarchies and processes.

First, the nature and number of actors involved in Covid-19 responses created the necessity for bureaucracies to reconsider and strengthen their coordination mechanisms through the alignment of various information processes (Mazzucato and Kattel, 2020; Christensen and Lægreid, 2007). As mentioned by one of interviewee: "As a whole, for the government it was a challenge of coordination capacity" (Uruguay interview). Coordination mechanisms were strengthened at the operational and strategic levels via the creation of cross-sectoral forces, but also by leveraging on the clarity of goals to align information processes and platforms, which supports the idea that the clarity of government goals during emergencies can facilitate coordination efforts (Rainey and Jung, 2015; Bouckaert et al., 2016; Peters, 2018).

We find that across countries, bureaucracies supported cooperation efforts via a range of channels. These included: setting up cross-sectoral taskforces and *ad hoc* advisory boards to help them coordinate across sectors and organisations; alignment of information-related processes across organisations, particularly via IT and data sharing and use; and the use of a whole-of-government approach to inform coordination efforts, which in some governments was already being considered (Quote Box 1). This alignment of information and processes was central to increasing the scope of cooperation and coordination across a multiplicity of actors.

Simultaneously, demands for enhanced flexibility and speed made further internal process changes crucial and there was a push towards decentralising some decisions, which led to bureaucracies fundamentally

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QUOTE BOX 1

Reconsideration of bureaucracies' coordination and cooperation mechanisms

We actually are able to engage at the leadership level and across organisational boundaries more effectively sometimes when we're dealing with kind of a crisis situation. I think making sure that we've empowered the center of government to lead coordination for these sorts of issues has been a really important thing to be sure that we are coordinating a whole of government response. (United States interview)

Something that we know, when you give people the opportunity to think and to be part of the process, they will come out there. But it became enforced more, became much clearer in this COVID environment where various ministries have brought up their own small changes here and there, which have surprised us. (...) they have come up with some integrated information management system which are improving adjusted delivery in this country. (Ghana interview)

Questioning of traditional decision-making and discretion inside bureaucracies

In terms of people management, how do we set in place certain work norms and policies to make work more flexible, fast? How do we balance this need for officers' autonomy on the ground with the organisation's needs, with the mission that we have to deliver on?
(Singapore Interview)

It's really important that we think carefully about where decisions need to be made within organisations. What sorts of things need to be made kind of in a whole of government, standardised way; versus where can we allow flexibility and allow decisions to be made at a lower level in the organisation?
(United States interview)

{Transversal teams] are continuous dialogues that we organise virtually with all the political leaders in the national and territorial entities, we invite them in advance to these teams to discuss remote working. Civil servants, HR and political leaders connect. Areas' directors have a talk with them and determine the public trajectory for the behaviour of civil servants on this topic. The direct interaction we have with our civil servants through transversal teams has been a determining factor
(Colombia interview)

questioning their traditional, hierarchical modes of decision-making (Quote Box 2). This push to delegate and decentralise raised a familiar set of tensions and trade-offs in how to balance the need for coordination with the needs for speed, discretion, and flexibility.

One of the primary ways institutions tried to surmount these trade-offs was through the adoption of agile methods[1] (c.f. Mergel et al., 2020; Dickinson and Sullivan, 2014). Many bureaucracies that had previously started to consider agility began to address these issues tentatively by placing a higher premium on transparent communication, enhancing feedback mechanisms, and broadening the scope of individual jobs and working routines. The changes implemented in the United States' federal civil service captured some of these trends: "I think that is powerful as a new way of working, because I think the silos, the kind of rigidity of the routines that we find ourselves in, and the proximity of who we think about working with if is defined by space, is so narrow; and if it's not defined by space that is a limiting factor, it opens up tons of possibilities. And that has always been there, but until virtual became the default kind of way of working, it didn't merely kind of take on the potential that I think it's going to hold going forward." (US interview).

The extent of changes in coordination mechanisms and internal processes, however, depended and varied in part based on the availability of resources, technological infrastructure, and existing norms. Many interviewees admitted that not all changes were uniformly implemented within single bureaucracies, let alone across them since technology could play an enabling role only where it was available and embraced by civil servants. More specifically, technology was praised by many interviewees for facilitating and enhancing communication by transcending geographical limitations, increasing the efficiency of recruitment process, and broadening access to training and development (Quote Box 3). Yet, harnessing technology has been more difficult in some countries due to limited resource availability and mismanagement and misalignment of existing infrastructures and technological platforms across agencies (Quote Box 4).

Organisational silos, entrenched cultural norms, and the lack of technological confidence also posed a coordination challenge in different places, echoing the longstanding idea that maximising the potential of digital technology is not only about equipping civil servants with technological tools and skills (Dickinson and Sullivan, 2014). One interviewee stressed how organisational culture and the lack of trust impeded the realising of potential gains: "This has to do with a cultural theme, this harmful culture in which when you go home on time you are suspected not to work or produce enough. So, not

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1 We define agile methods here as "a new package of routines and processes embedded within formal work groups and structures" (Mergel et al., 2020, p.3), which allows governments to respond efficiently to changing public needs. These new processes consider situations' fluidity and change overtime, and prioritise adaptive structures and individuals' discretion over bureaucratic procedures (Mergel et al., 2020).

QUOTE BOX 3

Technology as an enabler for change

I find it very amazing, because previously we were also confined by space, so I used to conduct meetings with 30, 40 individuals. Now in Microsoft Teams, I can meet 250 individuals at the same time. And while I'm speaking, people can chat, and people can share ideas. (Qatar interview)

Today you have processes of training and accompanying much more effective with a surprising level of participation from the regions, because the costs of plugging the screen is zero. (Chile interview)

In the past we could just have maybe two or three panels' meetings at once. Now I know you can have about 10 panels doing promotions and another three or four panel doing recruitment, which was difficult in the past. Suddenly the potential of a lot of people has come alive, and you have all kinds of people who are working differently. (Ghana interview)

having this direct control of people made continuing remote work really challenging in some institutions because there is lack of trust." (Peru interview). Ultimately, interviewees underlined that the potential for technology to facilitate organisational changes depends on overcoming existing organisational silos and entrenched cultural norms as well as resource management and allocation.

In sum, our interviews highlighted a key tension that emerged during pandemic responses between the dual imperatives to increase coordination on the one hand, but also to decentralise decision-making to increase speed and flexibility on the other hand. Civil services tried to reconcile this tension by utilising digital technology and adopting agile-like processes, both of which required a degree of questioning and rethinking of longstanding hierarchies. However, our interviewees were unanimous in emphasising that technology was an *enabler* of these changes rather than the driver of them, and indeed that many changes were not new ideas but rather the accelerated implementation of stalled or previously suggested ones. Overall, though, the implementation and success of these efforts has been variable, both across and within countries, and represents a key direction for future change agendas – a theme to which we return later.

QUOTE BOX 4

Limitations to structural changes

When I arrived, the electronic records this office used were not connected to other electronic records. This is a node problem in IT, systems do not talk to each other. The interoperability of distinct platforms is still a big problem for us. We are working on that. So, I implemented a new platform which talked with other platforms in the government. (Uruguay interview)

There was a strong effort to move to a different way of doing things. The issue? Resource management. All the resources were going to health, today we need to finance the healthcare. This implied a challenge of how to obtain the resources to develop these new tools or way of doing. (Chile Interview)

Records management across the service generally has improved as people have shifted to electronic records management or information management systems, we have less documents getting lost. But then the problem is that it has exposed clearly the organisations which have and those that do not have resources nor all the necessary logistics to be able to continuously do this online business. (Ghana interview)

4. Adapting leadership styles and training systems

SECTION KEY INSIGHTS

Adapting to the new nature of day-to-day tasks led to a change of leadership models and roles
- New understandings of what leading means

Leaders responded with new practices and upskilling
- Learning-by-doing: inclusive communications routines, greater autonomy, progressive separation from pre-pandemic evaluation metrics
- Upskilling themselves and their teams: integration of new skills, wider and more formalised training, broader recruitment

Willingness to challenge entrenched cultural norms as key task for leadership
- Enablers: resource availability, leaders' own adherence to the change agenda, ability to change mindsets

QUOTE BOX 5
Leadership definition and role

Rather than controlling leadership that focuses on whether the person is sitting or not; more seductor and motivated leaders, especially since we have a new generation that has different objectives. (...). Today we are in front of this imperative necessity of a management per objective rather than a permanency. (Chile interview)

We actually saw our employee engagement numbers go up. We're trying to better understand really what drove that, but I honestly think it's a pretty positive story as it relates to both the support they felt when they had to deliver the mission, as well as how they felt protected. (United States interview)

It was a challenge (...) to have a civil service that is much more than duties, rights, obligations and politics. So how do you construct trust relationships with your team, especially when you are a new leader or when new members enter the team?
(Peru interview)

These changes in processes also placed new demands on leaders and leadership within civil services. Bureaucracies were compelled to adapt pre-pandemic management practices and upskill internal capacities (Mazzucato and Kattel, 2020), and the task often fell upon leaders whose roles and burdens considerably expanded. This forced public leaders and managers to take on new roles and to begin to see themselves in different ways (Quote Box 5). Exemplifying how leaders' day-to-day tasks changed unexpectedly to secure speedy responses to the health crisis, one interviewee stressed: "We all did things differently. If you would have told me that I had to assemble a new unit with six new senior team leaders of 300 people, and I had to have done that virtually. I would have said no, that is not possible because of everything I know about leadership., you know, we need to be in the same space, we need to do this, we need to do that. But I did do it." (United Kingdom interview).

Leaders also had to balance various imperatives that arose because of the pandemic. Another interviewee explained: "Our senior leaders have talked about [the fact that] we are trying to balance three different types of work on two shoulders, and it is a very difficult balancing. One way to characterise it is by the '*ABC*': 'A' stands for public sector transformation, about *Ambition* pushing work to make public service future-ready. But a lot of this work has to be paced out because we also have to do *Business as usual*, which is the '*B*', but also *Covid-related work*, '*C*'." (Singapore interview).

QUOTE BOX 6

Structural management changes and integration of new evaluation criteria

There were many internal practices, many one-to-one moments that people created more than in the past. Sometimes, the need to adjust routines [due to Covid-19] was discussed. So, creating these spaces, that maybe were collective before, now become an individualised practice, which works as a feedback mechanism to understand more each person's motivation and their health situation. (Brazil interview)

What is true is that some formal structures have been freed in terms of "when should it be evaluated", "the evaluation must be signed". These things have become more flexible because nowadays no one is able to do an evaluation as we were doing it before. (Chile interview)

We are not using the scores provided by supervisors [to evaluate performance] anymore, but performance agreement plans defined between supervisors and individuals, which define the competencies they have to work on. For that purpose, we are developing guidelines like a dictionary of competencies. (...) We identified competencies in each occupation, some of them transversal, others more tied to the occupation. We want to evaluate civil servants according to these competencies. (Uruguay interview)

To deepen the culture of care and emphasis on mental health, (...) The head of civil service himself is asking every leader to adopt a system of prioritising and looking into the workload of our public officers. We are at this point even convening what we call learning circles where senior leaders at the Permanent Secretary and CEO levels come together to share personal experience about coping with their own mental health, about how they think about self-care or how they are supporting the mental health of our own workforce. (Singapore Interview)

Learning-by-doing played an important role in balancing these new imperatives. The interviewee from Ghana highlights the constant learning of leaders as they internalised their new role: "I remember we had to write from the hotel rooms, work on circulars where we started these flexible working hours, deciding quickly. It was like doing and learning at the same time because we had never had anything like that." (Ghana interview). Leaders' supervision and evaluation practices also progressively diverged from pre-pandemic objective metrics as new demands emerged and the imperatives of increased flexibility and cooperation made criteria like well-being and mobility more salient. Countries reacted to this with a range of new or adapted management practices, from communication routines to personnel evaluation systems (Quote Box 6).

Several interviewees acknowledged that further reflection is needed on how to entrench these changes in what leadership means. One interviewee reflected that "I now feel like I need two months off to capture it, embed it, and share it." (United Kingdom interview). Some also recognise that further effort is needed to integrate these changes into bureaucracies' daily routines: "At this moment we are communicating with civil servants who are home and unable to see colleagues through meetings with psychologists and psychiatrists. We are recommending it to the entities. Before that was done sporadically, but today we need to understand that it needs to be daily in the working dynamics of the entities." (Colombia interview).

These changes also created a demand for new competencies across the civil service to ensure business continuity, in particular related to technological use and data management competencies. In the longer-term, for most countries interviewed it is clear that building strong functional leadership also means increasing digital literacy at different tiers across the civil service, including leadership (Quote Box 7). This finding is in line with priorities set by international organisations, such as the OECD in the recent years, regarding the future of work (OECD, 2008; OECD, 2021).

At the same time, interviewees sounded words of caution concerning the complete replacement of in-person interactions with digital mediums. One interviewee explained: "There are some negatives. Some of the training needs to happen in a face-to-face environment. You actually need the individuals to be sitting because there is a lot of group work. And you

must have the human touch to it, instead of talking to individuals behind the laptop or the computer" (Qatar interview). Even if digital capabilities are becoming crucial, soft skills and face-to-face interactions are still recognised as central to training and management in the civil service (Dickinson and Sullivan, 2014).

Last but not least, it is important to recognise that in some countries, basic shortfalls in IT infrastructure and connectivity limited the extent to which management processes were able to be adapted. Even though all interviewees emphasised that digital technology was not the driver of these changes, it was a central facilitator. (Quote Box 8).

However, even when leaders themselves are willing and able to adapt, cultural change can remain a major obstacle. As one interviewee stressed: "It is all difficult and it is all interlinked actually. In the end, it is about changing culture, which is really heard to do. Even if you have leadership to make these changes, once you get down into the middle layers you have a lot of civil servants, public servants articulated in similar blocks inside each organisation, and they are very comfortable the way they are doing things." (Australia Interview). Significant and lasting changes thus depend on leaders' adherence to the change agenda and the tools available, but most importantly on their ability to orient people and change their mindset.

All in all, senior leaders worldwide foresee that they will face a set of challenges if they wish to sustain the positive aspects of the *ad hoc* transformations in processes that happened during the pandemic. The next section of this report will explore the outlook for civil services by providing some recommendations and priorities made by heads of civil services and senior civil servants around the world on how best to capture these changes in the future.

5. Outlook: sustaining and institutionalising change

This section discusses the agenda facing senior leaders who wish to sustain and extend the changes discussed above into the future, and provides insights into specific strategies that could allow them to do so. We refer to this process of embedding changes either formally or informally, or both, as institutionalisation efforts. This section is based on our synthesis of the outlooks and priorities identified by the senior officials we interviewed.

Following the discussion from sections 3 and 4 above, we identified four main sets of agenda items facing senior leaders in the medium- to long-term: 1) the expansion of horizontal cooperation and coordination; 2) building increased flexibility into internal processes; 3) adaptation of leadership styles and practices; and 4) training and upskilling of public officials (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Key agenda items for sustaining and institutionalising change

Issue area	Key goal	Strategies / Tools
Expansion of horizontal collaboration and coordination across agencies and sectors	Strengthening intersectoral management and systems to keep expanding cross sectors and within agencies collaboration.	– Cross-agency priorities and mission-centric teams – Collaborative information systems and tools
Building increased flexibility into internal processes	Adjusting and broadening the scope of individual jobs and working routines.	– Move towards a goal-oriented and flexible personnel evaluation system – Feedback mechanisms and testing of processes and policies
Adaptation of leadership styles and practices	Keep developing, cascading, and integrating new leadership skills	– Training managers and team leaders on system thinking, collective decision-making, feedback, communication, compassion/empathy
Training and upskilling of public officials	Reshaping career management and training systems	– Improve HR capacities to manage talent and personnel data – Become more talent attractive by diversifying recruitment, providing mobility, better onboarding

Source: Authors

The first agenda item entails developing further and sustaining the coordination mechanisms brought in to respond to the increased intensity and scope of inter-agency and intersectoral collaboration induced by the response to Covid-19. Our interviewees highlighted the need to set cross-agency priority goals, create mission-centric teams, and build cooperative alliances with other agencies and sectors to achieve this. Leaders also reflected on the importance of data-sharing and further alignment of collaborative platforms and processes to enable cross-agency and cross-sectoral work (Quote Box 9). As one interviewee highlighted: "Another area that we want to harness for the future is really in terms of building up stronger tech systems and linking up data across the whole of government. This is a key lesson that we want to lock in. How do we build up stronger technology systems? How do we link up data across the whole public service so that we can better tackle missions, so that we can better understand our citizens and serve their needs better?" (Singapore Interview).

Some leaders raised concern about the gap between their willingness to implement these strategies and the resources available for ensuring their effective development. Indeed, enhanced coordination

Examples of strategies to keep expanding collaboration and coordination mechanisms

There were at least 25 alliances for action that were formed, and I think one dimension of working through that was that we went out and said: "this is a problem and we want to work with the people and the business sectors to solve". (Singapore Interview)

We have to develop capacities in IT and data analysis. And they have to improve coordination capacities. (...) From one electronic application to another within the Presidency it can take three days to study the case. Now we are creating the system in which we make in a digital platform the whole system and we expect to fill a position will not take more than four months. We are uploading digital resumés, my efforts are concentrated in digitalisation systems to have the background of the civil servant in a digital platform. (Uruguay interview)

and cooperation supposes the existence of supporting infrastructures and platforms that are not available everywhere. As one interviewee noted, "We need a little bit of money in the beginning to make sure that the necessary facilities are available for this kind of service to be given optimally." (Uganda Interview). Another interviewee remarked: "I believe that the biggest challenge that we are facing, in global terms, is the operational continuity, and ensuring this operational continuity indeed has benefits but also has a lot of costs." (Chile interview). Thus, despite identifying clear strategies to expand collaboration and coordination, the avenues necessary for implementation are not always in place.

Many leaders are also seeking to find ways to maintain the flexibility in internal processes, and working routines that emerged during the pandemic are another change that leaders wish to capture as they strive to develop further agility. One interviewee explained: "Things change very fast and not only due to Covid-19. Even three-years plans don't work anymore. You can only plan annually, and you focus on outcomes and then you rebase yourself, adapt, change and move. And this responsiveness is not given as civil services normally are not very nimble and agile by design. So it is basically how to ensure that whatever civil services structure you have or systems you have could become an agile and nimble tab of systems and operators and workers in order for them to be able to move fast? That is the design principles that we are working on currently to re-engineer our civil services." (Qatar interview).

Many governments envision increasing their use of pilot schemes and tightening feedback mechanisms in order to achieve this. For example, one interviewee discussed the importance of "really looking at the mechanisms you have in place to regularly adjust and adapt policies based on feedback. I think one of the things that this pandemic has taught us is that the likelihood that you're going to get it right the first time is low. You need to acknowledge that it is a fluid situation, that we are learning new things all the time, and that we are going to be committed to iterating and adapting and adjusting our policies and our routines based on how things are playing out on the ground. (...) So now we are moving forward to do an additional pulse survey of our workforce. We are just asking three questions related to the pandemic and re-entry type decisions that are being made right now, so that we can continue to build on the progress that has been in place over the past several years" (United States interview). This approach can perhaps be understood as a semi-formal "adapt and adjust" mindset that emphasises the need for testing and reflecting before formalising changes into regulations.

In other countries, however, changing official regulations is considered crucial for institutionalising these new managerial practices. In Spain for instance, "From the point of view of our competences... our footprint and what we are working on for the future is this norm I talked about, that will be general for the whole administration and that will allow to establish this new form of work that has come to stay" (Spain interview). Still, other governments foresee structural and cultural limitations to the approaches recommending the institutionalisation of new working routines. As explained by our Uruguay interviewee: "I have seen many senior management systems fail because they did not develop a good system of evaluation and they did not write down strong rules for politicians to make

QUOTE BOX 10

Strategies to keep developing and integrating new leadership skills

The key six areas of crafting focused on integrity, on leadership, on working with government. So how do you work with ministers? How do you understand the processes of government well?(...) how do we do that in terms of providing advice, how do you do good policy and how you do good service implementation, including codesign? There are some of the core craft areas of focus we are just getting at. And we are using very much practitioners' expertise for teaching. So it's a very different approach to learning development. (Australia interview)

Another area is of course about the people: in terms of building stronger functional leadership capabilities, meaning that we are appointing different agencies with accountability and the mandate to level up the leadership capabilities indoors. This is a way for us to really have an agency that is anchored to provide and teach leadership: how to pull resources and to think more at the whole of systems level rather than, for each agency, to be looking at their own finance, their own ICT etc. This whole area of functional leadership is a key focus area that we want to lock in for the future. (...) We also want to equip people in every agency to play this sort of role [of awareness ambassador]. How do you provide support? Active listening? Empathetic conversations? (Singapore Interview)

those evaluations. But you need good performance agreements, and to write them down in Latin America is not easy" (Uruguay interview). Governments' ability to institutionalise greater operational flexibility thus faces a range of potential barriers.

The nature of leadership training is another important agenda item for many governments, in many cases building from a recognition that the change in leaders' roles during the pandemic is likely to persist. In most cases this involves more conscious thought and design going into the topics covered in formal leadership development courses, with key areas to be covered including system thinking, collective decision-making, and feedback and communication. The need for development of empathy and consideration of employees' well-being is another aspect of leadership that should be more systematised according to our interviewees (Quote Box 10).

On the issue of employee welfare, some countries such as Colombia have even started formal efforts for institutionalisation of these changes by integrating work-life balance in their legislation. "The *disconnecting law* that we just enacted aims to maintain the balance between work and personal lives. At the beginning we had not defined the red lines, but slowly the entities have been refining the topic" (Colombia interview). Although these strategies are praised by many, some leaders insisted that caution is warranted in places where bureaucratic systems and traditions are prominent: "The training we need it, it's going to be a challenge. We have to orient people and then changing the mindset. If you tell somebody who has entered the service in the 80's: "it is no longer necessary now for you to go to the field to see this, you can sit in your room now", it does not come in easily" (Uganda interview). Similarly, another interviewee stressed the profound questioning of bureaucratic hierarchies necessary to carry on these types of changes: "But it's also a deeper question of do we need to more fundamentally look at our governance structures, how we organise ourselves? How do you look at decision rights, and you know, how do we organise ourselves to be ready for the future?" (Singapore Interview). While change to these fundamental structures and norms may not come easily, the need for civil services to ask these questions of themselves is clear.

Finally, there is a shared recognition that the nature of training and career management needs to change as new skills are becoming crucial in the context of digitalisation. To face this need for upskilling bureaucracies, leaders are adopting different strategies to reshape career management. One interviewee stressed: "We still need a proper administrative career system, that is not in place. We need it probably more than before. We need an integrated system of human resources. And we still need a better evaluation system for public servants. I would say that this emphasis on strategic planning is probably even deeper than before (...) we needed it before the pandemic showed that

Strategies to reshape recruitment, training, and career management

How do we recruit, retain and develop our talents? (…) There is a strong view that we will be relying a lot on contractors, the IT side, digital side. In terms of how we go forward in the future, we really believe we need to develop our own start-up in terms of recruitment. A lesson in the last couple of years is that we need direct instruments and to find much simpler ways of making recruitment; but also recruiting people at earlier stage, right out of school, people doing internships, school leaders and pull that sense of growth,. (…) That is part of the new policy we put in place, a new development strategy. It is [a] learning [and] development strategy which goes beyond just teaching. Since we are all now in the world of continuous learning, can you keep learning or do we provide continuous learning and continuous upgrading of skills that allow public services staff to stay capable? That's one of the things that we are very focused on. (Australia interview)

The lesson from the last few years has been we need to be more prescriptive about the skills people need and the whole commitment to a campus for government training and learning, underpinned by a curriculum framework. We need to raise the floor and raise the ceiling. (…) We need to do a lot more deliberate planning so that everyone has the benefit of the skills, the knowledge, the networks to be effective in situations like that; a lot of our work on apprenticeships, on induction, on the fast stream, on leadership development, is informed by that sort of crisis response; and intervening much earlier in career pathways, so that you're not having to remedially give people procedural knowledge and domain knowledge. (United Kingdom interview)

HR needs to dedicate itself to new edges, that are consequences of the pandemic, for instance creating [a] manual of different functions at new levels of competencies. (…) Understand that there are new skills in the working world, that there are new careers, that we need to change the manuals of functions because now we need to have an expert in data reading. This is not contemplated in the current manuals of functions, such as for instance the experts in cybersecurity, the expert in blockchain. So necessarily, entities need to revoke the old manuals, revoke their human resources structures. (Colombia Interview)

This whole notion of productive longevity (…) what does this mean in terms of opportunities for more meaningful and longer careers in public service? At the same time, the challenge is that technology and the operating context is changing so fast, many jobs are evolving, are being made obsolete. The question is how, as an employer, do we establish a good system of soft skills, identification skills, development and also institute a sort of mental agility of our workforce? One where you can have a longer public service career, but you might not stay in one organisation for like 10-20 years counting. You can have a long career in public service in different jobs and gaining different sort of experiences and skills and pivoting along the way. (Singapore Interview)

it was essential." (Uruguay interview). Quote Box 11 illustrates some of the strategies different countries are using to approach this, ranging from broadening recruitment pools to institutionalising continuous learning, updating career structures, and even providing for greater flexibility over the course of careers.

Overall, leaders around the world have rapidly transitioned from the emergency pandemic response phase towards a new phase of trying to sustain positive change and using the momentum to drive forward a broader set of strategies to transform civil services for the challenges of the 21st century.

Insights from interviewees provide a richness of tools and strategies that civil services are adopting to implement these changes in the medium- to longer-term. Although the senior leaders we interviewed are broadly aligned on the main agenda items and big-picture strategies, the specific tactics and reforms adopted vary from one country to the other, and span both formal and informal mechanisms. And of course, leaders also foresee challenges to implementing these strategies ranging from "hard" factors, like limited resources and IT infrastructure, to "soft" constraints like the endurance of hierarchical bureaucratic traditions.

6. Conclusion

In this report, we have detailed how senior leaders of civil services worldwide adapted to the dual imperative imposed by the pandemic: greater speed, flexibility, and decentralisation of decision-making on the one hand, and greater coordination and collaboration on the other. This led them to make a range of changes, many of which revolved around the common theme of questioning, unpacking, and remaking the traditionally hierarchical structures and norms of their institutions. Institutionalising and deepening these changes is now at the top of the agenda for each of the senior leaders we interviewed.

While these insights into the thinking of the leaders who are shaping their services' reform agendas is invaluable, it also surfaces a number of tensions and further questions.

First, has actual practice in civil services around the world changed as much as senior leaders perceive it has? While the enforced shift to remote working and pandemic response disrupted day-to-day operations everywhere, it is still unclear how much this will eventually be seen as a temporary blip resulting in superficial changes to bureaucracies, as opposed to a spur for more fundamental rethinking. Are senior leaders correct in thinking that the nature of the challenges and the organisational methods needed to face them have changed, and to what extent will they actually be able to translate their high-level vision into broad-based institutional change?

Second, one of the major areas of disagreement between senior leaders was on the issue of whether and how these changes required formal changes to legislation and structures, as opposed to more informal learning-by-doing and changes in norms and culture. While this doubtless reflects differences in legal traditions and political contexts to some extent, it also reflects differing mental models and approaches to reform – differences that are also reflected within scholarship on public administration and organisational change. What will be the implications of these differing approaches for leaders' ability to institutionalise and deepen the change processes that have begun?

Finally, in this report we have focused largely on the perceptions, interpretations, and vision of leading practitioners with respect to recent and future transformations in the civil service. What is the role of academics and researchers in contributing to understanding these changes, shaping them, and helping realise them? If so many senior policymakers are asking fundamental questions about the nature and structure of the civil service, what fundamental questions about public administration theory and empirical research methods should we also be asking? Are there longstanding debates or questions that have been rendered irrelevant by the advance of practice, and what are the most crucial new questions in need of good theory and evidence?

Rather than venture answers to these questions ourselves, we leave them for the reflection of readers and for future research efforts. The past two years have been a period of such rapid change that practice in different civil services has diverged in ways that are only beginning to be documented, and has outpaced the ability of researchers to keep pace. We hope that this report proves useful as a small step towards chronicling, sharing, and analysing these changes and those that await in the coming years.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Selection process

The selection of countries participating in the study followed an overarching criterion: Heads of Civil Service were targeted based on Blavatnik School of Government's academic and professional networks. In order to obtain a more diverse sample of countries, three additional selection criteria were considered: 1) geographical representation, aiming to expand territorial coverage to developing and developed countries on all continents; 2) an intentional overrepresentation of developing countries to minimise the lack of data publicly available; 3) other additional diversity criteria e.g., cultural influences on bureaucracies, size of bureaucracies, and systems of government (federal vs. non-federal).

Once the countries were selected, 18 countries were contacted. The research team first sent formal invites for an interview via email to the 8 Heads of Civil Service we were able to contact without the support of intermediaries. Subsequently, the research team sent formal invites for another 10 Heads of Civil Service with the support of intermediaries at the Blavatnik School of Government (faculty, researchers, and doctoral students). In cases in which Heads of Civil Service were not available, we used snowball sampling for targeting and asked them to connect us with their direct subordinate or the person they considered would be better able to answer our questions. With a formal acceptance from the Head of Civil Service or other officials, the research team sent an interview protocol and a consent form to be signed by the interviewee prior to the interview via videocall.

A total of 14 interviews were conducted between August 2021 and March 2022. When interviews were held in languages other than English, the University of Oxford's language centre translated the transcript into English. Some quotations were lightly edited for clarity or grammar in order to improve readability, in cases where this could be done without affecting meaning.

Appendix B: Semi-structured interview protocol

VOICES OF PEOPLE IN GOVERNMENT
General guidelines for the Interview

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. This interview is part of a multi-country study being conducted by the People in Government Lab at the University of Oxford on how civil services are responding to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study aims to understand the needs, challenges, and responses of civil services around the world in this crucial period, and the findings will be used for research and policy recommendations to governments in facing novel challenges to the public sector in the future.

Topic 1: Challenges and Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

Objective: Explore the challenges civil services are facing due to the Covid-19 pandemic; how they are responding to them via technological adoptions, workplace re-arrangements, and management practices; and how their responses are affecting employee learning, well-being, and performance.

1. Main lessons learned so far in responding to the challenges posed by COVID-19 to the civil service.
2. Major challenges posed by COVID-19 on civil service's functions and performance
3. COVID-19 effects on public employees' wellbeing, motivation, performance and organizational learning.
4. Changes on technology adoption, workplace re-arrangements, and management practices.

Topic 2: People management challenges in the mid-term

Objective: Explore the issues concerning the mainstreaming of COVID-19 related reforms and the mid-term challenges facing civil services.

1. From changes adopted as a response to COVID-19 challenges, the most likely to be mainstreamed.
2. Main challenges on people management for the next five years.

Source: Authors

Appendix C: Coding process and codes list

Coding took place in two main stages:

1 Multiple coding of all over 50% of the qualitative data, meaning two team members coded one transcript independently and then compared their codes and the coding frames. One member of the authorship team first coded all the interviews, while seven others participated coding one transcript. Thus, the codes and the coding frames were adjusted as a result of the seven bilateral meetings held.

2 The codes and the coding frames were presented and discussed with the research team in two subsequent meetings.

The analysis of the data took place in a collaborative way through discussion groups and team meetings to discuss the coding system and the data available. The main criteria used to determine the themes and subthemes were:

- The number of mentions in the interviews. To minimise coding bias and harmonise interpretations, the same data was shared among the team members and then discussed. This technique helped to reduce the interpretation bias of each team member by trying to find a common ground.

- Juxtaposing interview data against the extant theoretical and empirical literature on relevant topics in public administration and related fields, in order to ground the discussions in existing literature while also identifying points of novelty or disjuncture.

The extended codes list extracted from the first coding exercise available below provides examples of the themes and sub-themes that were coded from the data. Among the main themes were government collaboration and collaboration, digitalisation and leadership and new management practices.

This coding process guided the identification of key themes, which were later used to elaborate the analysis of each theme and structure the report as a whole.

Name	Files	References
Digitalization and remote work benefits (unintended)	14	148
Engagement & Collaboration	11	28
Decentralization	12	25
Inclusivity	11	25
Training and evaluating more people	7	18
Cost reduction	7	14
Better service delivery	6	11
Mobility	5	8
Time-management	4	8
Better information management	3	6
Reducing corruption	1	2
Government collaboration with different sectors	11	36
Intersectorial collaboration	9	23
Intrasectorial collaboration	5	12
Associations and syndicates	6	8
Performance & Productivity	6	8
Continuity	5	6
Output reduction	3	4
Higher performance	1	3
Unproductive work	2	2
Changes to be maintained in the future	1	3
Hybrid-flexible work	13	63
Technology prevalence and digitalization	14	53
Better management practices	11	47
Employees' well-being policies	12	28
New workers profiles	9	26
Workplace and departments rearrangement	9	17
Ressources management	5	11
New Leadership	7	10
Future challenges of public sector	1	1
Adapting to change-innovation	12	72
Training	13	43
Attract and retain talent, motivation	11	34
Mindsdet (cultural) change	11	

● Regular Communication with employees and stakehold...	10	27
● Flexible working	5	22
● Finding new evaluation methods	4	16
● Need for IT investment	9	16
● Aligning service delivery to citizens' need	3	9
● Balancing Ambition Business and Covid (ABC)	2	7
● Need for clearer responsibilities	4	6
∨ ● Difficulties related to COVID-19	0	0
> ● Well-being	10	26
● Alignment between different agencies	9	22
● Personal and worklife balance	11	22
● Ill-defined roles and responsibilities	9	20
● Communications issues	11	19
● Lack of regulations	6	17
● Lack of infrastructures	6	16
● Transforming tradi knowledge	5	14
● Cultural habits clashes	6	11
● Discrepancy between policymaking and realities on th...	5	11
● Financial costs	4	11
● Multidimensionality	7	11
● Reduction of workforce	8	9
● Measuring productivity	3	4
∨ ● Key lessons	0	0
● Developing adaptability and agility	14	75
> ● Leadership and HR importance	14	70
> ● Trust and transparency importance	14	66
● Cooperation	12	60
● Modernization and reshaping needed	10	60
● Developing efficiency and speed	13	52
● Whole of government approach possible	10	46
● Acceleration of existing dynamics-Impetus	12	38
● Need for new regulations	5	36
● Need for inclusivity & empathy	9	32
> ● Institutional learning crucial	11	27
● Autonomy needed	4	8

Source: Authors – Nvivo

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