

Barriers of Government as a Platform in Practice

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Abstract: Government as a Platform (GaaP) is a promising approach to digital transformation in the public sector that aims at creating efficient and user-friendly services by the use of network effects and co-creation. Several countries like the UK and Italy already pursue the GaaP approach. However, introducing GaaP remains challenging, especially in federal states. This poster presents barriers of the introduction of GaaP in the project of a federal agency in Germany. The barriers help understand the applicability of GaaP in practice and motivate future research on potential measures to overcome those barriers.

Keywords: Government as a Platform, digital transformation, federal states

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1. Situation and Complication

Platforms in the public sector are associated with benefits and public value via integration, efficiency and innovation, but also user-friendly public services [1]. Platforms and platform ecosystems can be described as compromising "a platform owner that implements governance mechanisms to facilitate value creating mechanisms on a digital platform between the platform owner and an ecosystem of autonomous complementors and consumers" [2]. In his seminal work "Government as a Platform" (GaaP) Tim O'Reilly proposes lessons learnt on how to adapt such a platform approach to the public sector [3]. Countries like UK [4] and Italy [5] already pursue the approach and the EU emphasizes its benefits .

However, the implementation of GaaP in practice remains challenging. In particular, in federal states where decisions and implementations need consensus and coordination of multiple parties [6]. Often there is no single entity that can "own" the Platform and the introduction of a GaaP approach needs consensus in such states.

2. Resolution and Methodology

This poster presents preliminary results from a use case from Germany. Based on a systematic literature review and data from the use case we analyze the factors and mechanisms that hindered the success of the project and identify the underlying barriers.

The use case is a project by the federal government agency FITKO to introduce a platform approach to the IT infrastructure that is used for forwarding applications from the portal of one state to the business application of another. To this end, the agency aims at a standardized API interface and delivery service that allows an ecosystem of portals to work on the same platform infrastructure.

3. Results

Barrier 1: It remains unclear what GaaP means in practice. The working groups of the project revealed that the agency has clear ideas about the technical components and interfaces of the project but struggled to define what exactly the platform is and what its boundaries are.

Barrier 2: The GaaP approach is hard to communicate. In the course of the project the term platform was often associated with a web-site or a tangible artefact; a platform for government [7]. The more fundamental approach that considers “government as a platform” is not tangible and, thus, harder to explain.

Barrier 3: Unclear where to start and how. Despite the guidelines from O'Reilly, the chicken-egg problem of platforms extended also to the project of the use case. Should the project start with the interface specification or the creation of an ecosystem?

Barrier 4: Difficulty to define the platform boundary. In the investigated use case the accessibility of the API from outside of the government network was a much debated issue. This is embedded in the general discussion on openness vs. control of platforms.

4. Implication and Future Work

Government as a Platform is a promising approach for the efficiency and user-friendliness of government. However, for the introduction of GaaP in practice it is necessary to understand the barriers that hinder its implementation. Further work should evaluate the barriers in other use cases and develop measures to overcome them.

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