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Regenerating the Human Capital Ecosystem of the Public Service Ecosystem in African Countries through Digital Transformation: An Experiential Perspective

Muritala Awodun, PhD^{1*}, Habibah Kike Kamaluddeen-Aiyelabegan, PhD²

¹ Professor and Director, Centre for Enterprise and Human Capital Development, Crown-Hill University, Eiyenkorin, Kwara State, Nigeria

² Kwara State Internal Revenue Service, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria

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***Corresponding author:** Muritala Awodun, PhD

Professor and Director, Centre for Enterprise and Human Capital Development, Crown-Hill University, Eiyenkorin, Kwara State, Nigeria

Abstract

The human capital ecosystem in public service in most of the African countries have been drowned in inefficiency due to bureaucracy and political interferences (Rogger, 2018). The service that is assigned to this sector of the government comes in the form of public good for the interest of the general public. However, what we see is that the services are not rendered efficiently due to the bureaucratic approaches, on one hand, and the abuses of offices through political interferences, on the other hand (Ifaka & Odigie, 2021). To bring the public service in African countries to the expected level of efficiency, this paper revisits the public service ecosystem to regenerate its human capital ecosystem in line with the concept of the ecosystem as introduced by Adner (2017) with the application of digital technology. We therefore relate the human capital ecosystem to the public service ecosystem (Kinder, et. al., 2021; Rossi & Tuurnas, 2021; Strokosch & Osborne, 2020; McAdam, 2019) through the introduction of technology while adopting the four levels integrative framework (Petrescu, 2019) of institution building, service provision, individual actor and personal beliefs (Osborne et.al. 2021). This framework further integrates service management with marketing theory, public administration, and management theory. With an integration of these theories and their application to the public service ecosystem of a government agency in north central Nigeria, as our case study, the results of our experiential experimentation show that with a realignment of focus on value addition, in the form of public value, as proposed by Vargo & Lursch (2016) to the public service ecosystem, and the use of digital technology, there will be significant improvement in the performance of the human capital ecosystem.

Keywords: Human capital ecosystem, public service ecosystem, public value, public service

1.0. Introduction

The term “ecosystem” has itself grown to encompass an ecology of meanings (Autio & Thomas, 2014; Adner & Kapoor, 2016). A helpful distinction can be made between two general views, and these are; the ecosystem as affiliation, and the ecosystem as structure. While the former sees ecosystems as communities of associated actors defined by their networks and platform affiliations, the latter, on the other hand, views ecosystems as configurations of activity defined by a value proposition (Adner, 2017). From the affiliation perspective, therefore, actors define actions, and ultimately value, while from the structure perspective, values define actions and ultimately actors.

The ecosystem as structure approach is clearly distinguishable from other available strategy constructs (Rong & Shi, 2014), because it offers a more actionable perspective on interdependence, and because it more clearly opens up a host of new and distinctive questions for the field of strategy (Adner & Kapoor, 2010). However, while the perspectives of ecosystem as affiliation and ecosystem as structure are conceptually distinct, they are mutually consistent, as one does not rule out the other.

To bring the public service in African countries to the expected level of efficiency, this paper identifies the need to revisit the public service ecosystem (Mustak & Ple, 2020; Lite & Hodgkinson, 2021) and regenerate its human capital ecosystem in line with the concept of the ecosystem as introduced by Adner (2006, 2017). This is because the human capital ecosystem in public service, in most of the African countries, have been predominantly inefficient due largely to poor practice of bureaucracy and political interference in the bureaucratic system (Roger 2014).

The functions assigned to this sector of the government comes in the form of public good, in the interest of the general public. However, what is deployed are services rendered inefficiently due to the bureaucratic approaches, on one hand, and the abuses of offices through political interferences, on the other hand (Ifaka & Odigie, 2021). What can we do to reverse this highly inefficient public service culture? The search for answer to this question is the reason for the study that produces what we present in this paper as we relate the human capital ecosystem to the public service ecosystem based on the theses of Kinder, et. al., (2021); Rossi & Tuurnas, (2021); and Strokosch & Osborne, (2020) where they adopted the four levels integrative framework of Petrescu, (2019) based on institution building, service provision, individual actors and personal beliefs, also affirmed by Osborne et.al. (2022).

This framework, as presented, integrates service management with marketing theory, public administration, and management theory. We set out to experiment on this integrated framework within a public service agency in north central Nigeria at the beginning of 2017, and for a period of two years (24 months to be precise), we applied participant observation in our experiential experimentation. With an integration of these theories and their application to the public service ecosystem of the agency of government, so many missing points and values in the bureaucratic system were hedged against, as the results obtained reveal that value addition, through properly defined public value, (Vargo & Lursch, 2016; Vargo, et. al., 2017) to the public service ecosystem, could bring about significant improvement in the performance of the human capital ecosystem.

This paper starts with an introduction of the concept of the ecosystem above, and follows with a background to the perspectives on ecosystem. It then examines the theoretical development in public administration and management, and the concepts of “value” and “value creation” dovetailing to the concept of the “public service ecosystem.” Subsequently, it draws these elements together to offer an integrative framework of value creation in public service delivery. We then present our findings and concluding remarks about our explorative experimentation through an experiential application of the integrative framework to the public service ecosystem of the agency of government in this north central part of Nigeria.

2.0. Background to the Ecosystem Perspectives

In our search for understanding of the concept of the ecosystem, we discover the different perspectives from which the ecosystem has been perceived. While the perspectives of ecosystem as affiliation and ecosystem as structure are conceptually distinct, they are regarded as mutually consistent, as one does not rule out the significance of the other. This is further confirmed, as we present below the distinctive features of each perspective for purpose of clarity.

2.1. Ecosystem as Affiliation

The ecosystem as affiliation, is an approach that begins with the actors (usually defined by their ties to a focal actor), before considering the links among them, and then, ends with the possible value propositions and enhancements that the ecosystem can generate. It therefore follows the trail of ‘actor-network-action-value’.

The concept of the ecosystem originated as a biological metaphor, when Iansiti & Levien (2004) define business networks as ecosystems, organized around a keystone species, and “characterized by a large number of loosely interconnected participants who depend on each other for their mutual effectiveness and survival.” The notion of a business ecosystem put forward by Li & Garnsey (2013) highlighted the need for strategy to extend its consideration beyond rivals competing within industry boundaries.

Following from the above, there have been other such definitions of ecosystems as networks of affiliated organizations in recent times as we found in Autio & Thomas (2014), Jacobides, Cennamo & Gawer (2015) and Rong & Shi (2014). This perspective of the ecosystem places emphasis on the breakdown of traditional industry boundaries, the rise of interdependence, and the potential for symbiotic relationships in productive ecosystems. It focuses on questions of access and openness, highlighting measures such as number of partners, network density, and actors’ centrality in larger networks.

From the point of view of Brandenburger & Nalebuff (1996) and Jacobides, Knudsen & Augier (2006), strategy is seen under the ecosystem as affiliation perspective, from the realm that tends to focus on increasing the number of actors that link to a focal actor or platform, increasing its centrality and expected power. By increasing the number and intensity of participants in its ecosystem, however, the focal actor increases its bargaining power, increases system value through direct and indirect network externalities (Parker, Van Alstyne & Choudary, 2016), and increases the likelihood of serendipitous interactions between

partners that may unlock new interactions and combinations that will in turn increase the overall value creation of the system.

Therefore, ecosystem as affiliation offers an appealing metaphor and a helpful description for interactions at a macro level. However, it is often hard to disentangle its characterizations and recommendations from those of other approaches to interdependence (e.g., networks, platforms, multisided markets).

Moreover, because of its tendency to look at aggregates, the strategy guidance offered by this perspective tends to focus on general governance and community enhancements, with limited insight into the specifics of value creation.

2.2. Ecosystem as Structure

The ecosystem as structure is the alternative perspective as presented by Adner (2000, 2006, 2013); Adner & Feiler (2016); Adner & Kapoor (2010, 2016), and it offers a complementary approach to considering interdependent value creation. This approach starts with a value proposition and seeks to identify the set of actors that need to interact in order to actualize the proposition. Contrary to the affiliation chain that starts with the actors and ends with the value proposition, the structure perspective starts with the value proposition and ends with the actor. It thus follows the trail of 'value-activities-action-actor'.

There are four basic elements underlying the ecosystem as structure approach, and they characterize the configuration of activities and actors required for a value proposition to materialize. These elements are; activities, actors, positions and links. While activities specify the discrete actions to be undertaken in order for the value proposition to materialize, actors, on the other hand, are the entities that undertake the activities.

Positions refers to where, in the flow of activities across the system, actors are located, and characterize who hands off to whom, while links specify transfers across actors. The content of these transfers can vary between; material, information, influence and funds. Critically, these links need not have any direct connection to the focal actor.

As a result of their different starting points, the ecosystem-as-affiliation (focuses and starts with the actors) and ecosystem-as-structure (focuses on activities and starts with the value propositions activities) with differences in their treatment of these elements.

Indeed, the two perspectives follow opposite directions of strategic construction: The ecosystem-as-affiliation approach begins with the actors (usually defined by their ties to a focal actor), considers the links among them, and ends with the possible value propositions and enhancements that the ecosystem can generate.

In contrast, the ecosystem-as-structure view begins with the value proposition, considers the activities required for its materialization, and ends with actors that need to carry out the actions. While the affiliation approach is focused on actors with direct ties to the focal organization, the ecosystem-as-structure approach explicitly extends the strategic view to include activities and actors over which the focal organization may have no control, and with whom they have no direct contact.

3.0. The Theoretical Framework

The digital transformation of society, increasing globalization, and most recently, the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a re-evaluation of public administration and

management (PAM) in this 21st century (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). This theory is still evolving and responding rapidly to changes in society as they come.

In the late 20th century, the dominant paradigm was a new public management (NPM), which offered a "product-dominant" approach to the delivery of public services. It concentrated upon organizational efficiency and dyadic relationships between public service organizations (PSOs) and their users, often conceptualized as customers (Radnor, Osborne, and Glennon 2016). This frequently occurred within market or quasi-market environments as other models of the NPM were also developed.

Increasingly, though, the NPM has become subject to widespread critiques, including the appropriateness of its product-dominant assumptions, its challenge to democratic governance, its adherence to outmoded models of competition, and its introspective emphasis on the internal efficiency of PSOs rather than external impact (Funck and Karlsson 2020; Haveri 2006).

These critiques coalesced around a range of issues (Hood and Peters 2004; Kickert 2003). These issues include the ability/inability of PSOs to create external value through public service delivery, the lack of attention to broader networks of PSOs rather than individual PSOs, the failure to address citizens other than as atomized consumers (for example as active citizens at the interface of democracy and public service provision), and the preoccupation with models of public service delivery that drew heavily upon private sector manufacturing experience.

These critiques led subsequently to the proliferation of alternative reform frameworks for understanding the delivery of public services (Osborne & Strokosch 2022). Four frameworks have been especially influential in the evolution of PAM theory and practice, and these are: *Public Value* (PV), addressing the societal impacts of public services; *Collaborative Governance* (CG), examining the role of the local milieu and organizational networks of public service delivery; *Public Service Logic* (PSL), addressing citizen value creation through public service delivery; and *Behavioral Public Administration* (BPA), focusing upon the psychology of citizens and staff engaged in public service provision.

While such approaches have evolved, currently PAM theory lacks an understanding about how the analytic foci of these post-NPM theories both are distinguished from and interlock with each other, and how they pose public service reform with different/competing priorities (Reiter and Klenk 2019). The *public service ecosystem* (PSE) is seen as an integrating framework that reveals both the distinctiveness and synergies of these theories. Uniquely, at the core of our framework, we explore the varying discourses on *value and value creation* within these post-NPM theories, as part of a four-level nested ecosystem. Such a value creation focus is essential to structure both the significant global discourses on value creation in public services currently emerging within PAM (Osborne, Nasi & Powell 2021) and the evolution of sustainable public services in the future (Cabral et al. 2019; Lindqvist and Westrup 2020).

The framework presented above focuses on the four strands of PAM evolution identified above, as its dominant theoretical trajectories. Other important frameworks that have evolved are Digital Era Governance (Dunleavy et al. 2006) and New Public Service (NPS) (Denhardt and Denhardt 2015), although none of these have assumed the import of the frameworks highlighted. Digital Era Governance, for example, has remained primarily a

descriptive account of the impact of digital technology on accountability and become subsumed within this broader accountability literature (Young 2020), while Denhardt and Denhardt (2015) have lamented that the NPS has not become a dominant framework despite its critique of the NPM.

4.0. Experimenting with the Integrative Framework

The integrative framework of the public service ecosystem as affirmed by Osborne et. al. (2015) has four pillars, namely; institution building, service provision, individual actors and personal beliefs. Aligning and integrating the above with the theoretical propositions of public administration, service management, marketing and management further cement the integrative nature of the framework.

In our attempt to apply the ecosystem as structure perspective in our selected agency of government, we adopted the trail of starting with the value proposition for this organization, identifying and agreeing on the varieties of activities to be carried out by role players in this organization under carefully define job descriptions, and finally assign actors or role players, in the form of staff, with the various tasks.

This experimentation was carried out with a carefully selected team of twenty-two (22) middle level managers who possess the requisite skills and capacities of the various tasks and roles identified for the accomplishment of the public service delivery extracted from the value proposition identified at the beginning. We were of the opinion that setting these middle level staff up as a bridge between the top-level management and the lower level management will uphold the public service objective of the agency.

Within a set timeframe of 24 months, the integrative framework in table 1 below was experimented in the organization with the set values, programmed activities and actions being monitored with daily/weekly performance measurement against set goals and objectives.

Table 1: The Integrative Framework

<p>Prioritizing Institution Building in the pursuit of Public Value (Public Admin Theory)</p>	<p>Focusing on Service Provision using Public Service Logic (Service Management Theory)</p>
<p>Making the Individual Actors the center of Collaborative Governance (Marketing Theory)</p>	<p>Recognizing Personal Beliefs in the construct of Behavioral Public Admin (Management Theory)</p>

With our understanding of the concept that public service management practice requires appreciating that value creation, for public service users and other key stakeholders, is not the purview of public service organizations solely but occurs within dynamic public service ecosystems, it was not difficult to regenerate these middle level managers as the human capital ecosystem required for delivery of public value in public service.

Consequently, we realigned both public service managers and politicians to accept the need to see that public value creation

occurs across the institutional/societal, organizational, local milieu, individual, and belief levels of both the public service and human capital ecosystems.

What we did was to prioritize institution building in the construct of the agency public value such that all the selected middle managers could relate with these values and the purpose behind its pursuit.

There was therefore, both the need for a shift of performance management for public service organizations away from the internal value chains to the external value creation. This shift of attention to value for the external customers, the public, made the difference in performance.

The external stakeholders, upon realizing that the staff of the agency gives priority to them and the service offered was of value, embraced the institution building concept without much ado.

At the end, we observed that public service staff, managers, and politicians, all need to embrace the need to mediate between societal and individual value creation and between value creation aspirations of the various stakeholders in the public service ecosystem.

5.0. Findings

5.1. How Was Public Value Created?

The first strand of post-NPM theory to address this issue of public value theory is Moore (1995), who argued that in order for public services to secure societal legitimacy, they must create something substantively valuable for society (public value), be politically sustainable, and be operationally feasible. Underlying this theory were the confident assertions by Talbot (2009) that public value is what the public values, and by Bozeman (2007) that public value concerns a “normative consensus” about the rights/obligations of citizens and the principles of effective governance. Benington (2011) also acknowledged the potential for conflict between individual and society as the locus for value creation, privileging the latter over the former.

Increasingly though, this seductive simplicity has been variously challenged. O’Flynn (2007) argues that a “clear definition of public value remains elusive,” while Rhodes and Wanna (2007) have opined that its “ambiguous nature” has fuelled its popularity stating that public value is all things to all the people. Consequently, Alford and O’Flynn (2009) had concluded that “we are still some way from being in a position to predict whether public value will prove to have enduring value in the public and administration management domain.” The debate continues, with competing perspectives on the import of the public value construct, from the managerial to the societal (e.g., Faulkner and Kaufman 2018; Fukumoto and Bozeman 2019; O’Flynn 2021).

Since value has been a consistent element of the new public management discourse within public and administration management, since the 1980s, it became obvious that we should adopt an institution building concept as embedded in the integrative framework for our agency. For this to be achieved, public administration theories were given attention for best practice, with public value as the center of gravity.

To achieve the set objectives, we paid particular attention to training of the human capital (the 22 middle level managers) to be deployed on this assignment of regenerating the entire human capital ecosystem of the agency. The consistent training

mechanism's focus was based on imbibing the value of institution building on each of the selected middle management, challenging them to recognize their central role as the link to both the top and the lower level management. These trainings brought out the public value challenge and presented these middle level management as the solution to delivering excellent public service to the people.

5.2. How Did We Embrace Collaborative Governance?

The role of the individual as the main actor in the human capital ecosystem of the public service ecosystem was the basis of embracing collaborative governance in the experimental agency. The selected 22 middle level managers were first seen as individuals and role players, in the form of actors in the public service ecosystem. Each of them were made to know that it is the conglomeration of their individual actions and roles that forms the collective position of the agency under collaborative governance. As significant as the individuals are for the institution building and public value conception and delivery, so are they for collaborative governance.

The genesis of this approach was found in political science models of governance. Ansell and Gash (2008) claimed that it "promises sweet reward" and that "if we govern collaboratively, we may avoid the high costs of adversarial policy making, expand democratic participation, and even restore rationality to public management." Equally, they warn that powerful stakeholders can manipulate the process and that distrust can become a barrier, therefore raising an argument for a contingent theory of collaborative governance. This position subsequently became integrated with emergent approaches to network governance (Klijn 2008), the new public governance (Osborne 2010), and open innovation (Fulsgang 2008) to create a unified theory of collaborative governance (Torfing and Ansell 2017).

Collaborative governance, however, has been criticized by Wegrich (2019) who argued that it simplistically assumes "that the organizational biases and behaviours typically limiting collaboration are simply bureaucratic weaknesses that organizational leaders can overcome if they only make an effort." Others have argued that it is limited by its inadequate appreciation of gender inequalities (Johnston 2017), by power and trust imbalances (Ran and Qi 2018), and by leadership failures (Kinder et al. 2021). Moreover, collaborative governance is a broad school with competing perspectives on the contribution of third sector organizations to its practice (e.g. Ansell and Gash 2008, Emerson et al. 2012).

By our recognition of the individual actors and their roles, we introduced an expanded management forum in the form of bi-weekly meetings that did not only give these selected managers a sense of belonging, but having, first-hand information and being part of management decision making. This was our distinct adherence to collaborative governance.

5.3. Why Did We Adopt Public Service Logic?

First, we were convinced that the service of the agency was a public service without doubt, and the concept of service management with customer service excellence should be our watchword. With service excellence as the drive for our service provision, we were sure that delivery of service excellence will have to follow the public service logic.

The proponents of public service logic have sought to explore public services "as services." These proponents have argued against the hegemony of the NPM as a product-dominant approach

to meeting societal needs and have emphasized value creation as a lens through which to appreciate the dynamics of public service delivery (Osborne 2021). The body of work on public service logic has explored the nature of co-production for public services (Landi and Russo 2021; Palumbo and Manesh 2021), public service design/co-design approaches (Trischler, Dietrich, and Rundle-Thiele 2019), the meaning of value destruction for public services (Engen et al. 2020), value creation for multiple (sometimes competing) stakeholders across public services (Powell, Gillett, and Doherty 2019) and the implications of this ongoing debate for public administration and management theory and practice (Dudau, Glennon, and Verschuere 2019).

Following service management theory, the agency made service the core of its core values. To achieve this service drive, excellence was the watchword with clear processes of work defined, and staff taken through these processes as it affects them with performance benchmarks set in conformity with international best practices. Most of the selected middle managers were encouraged to champion the standardization process for quality assurance and business continuity. The agency was also subjected to global certification by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) to sustain the standards established. With this the public service delivery process was firmly established and owned by the middle level managers as the 'life' of the agency's service excellence.

5.4. How Did We Relate with Behavioral Public Administration?

This being the most recent development in new public management and public administration and management discourse, explores the application of psychological methods/insights to public administration and management theory (Grimmelikhuisen et al. 2017) and focuses on the values and behaviors of public service users and staff, and their impact upon public service delivery. In other words, the personal behavior and value of the staff delivering the public service, as well as the consumers of the public service are given due consideration here.

Since 2017, behavioral public administration has further embraced such issues as public service motivation (Breugh, Ritz, and Alfes 2018) and the impact of individual and societal values on performance management (Steccolini, Saliterer, and Guthrie 2020). Despite critics' arguments that it is naive in both its "cult" of expert (Feitsma 2018) and its attempt to create a "post-political" neo-liberal discourse (Whitehead, Jones, and Pykett 2017), it remains relevant for the fact that behavior of actors cannot be underplayed in evaluating public service delivery.

For the above reasons, we took into consideration the individual/personal behavioral traits of the selected 22 managers, and paid equal attention to the behavioral patterns of the consumers of the service of the agency, collating these through the various groups and associations that represent the interests of the various clientele of the agency.

What this step added as value is our ability to design the public service delivery to meet the expectations of the variety of clientele using the most appropriate staff mix that could relate with the diverse mix of people consuming the service of the agency. We did not lose sight of the need to impress it upon the staff that the consumers of the service of the agency are uppermost in the public service delivery equation.

6.0. Concluding Remarks

Applying the integrative framework to the public service ecosystem in our attempt to regenerate the human capital ecosystem as core of the public service delivery brought out some unique challenges and results.

First, is the people challenge which is a major factor if the human capital ecosystem must be realigned with the public service ecosystem. The concept of the people challenge is not only limited to the internal people (staff) of the agency, but also the external people (staff of other government ministries, departments and agencies; the politicians; the customers and their associations/groups; and other stakeholders). While it is not out of place to want to wish away the impact of this people challenge, it however, requires some extra efforts from the staff/management for the sustenance of the public service delivery.

Second, is the paradigm change syndrome which makes excellence strange to the people thus resulting in a sort of shock at first. Because the consumers of the public service have gotten used to poor and inefficient service delivery, the presentation of an agency offering excellent public service resulted in some sort of shock that requires some time for the people to accept the reality of the quality of service delivery. This also was taken care of with the institutionalization of the processes to ensure the sustenance of the standards put in place.

Third, is the political interference in the leadership of the agency which to a large extent had its impact on the pace of progress (performance) of the agency not objectively done. In this wise, the only sustenance of agency values and process for excellence in public service delivery is the quality assurances benchmark against global best practices. This is expected to keep the crop of the middle level managers as the sustaining strength of the agency when situations of subjectivity set in.

Finally, in spite of these challenges, the outcome of a regenerated human capital ecosystem, empowered through direct involvement and training for public service delivery led to significant organizational performance over the two-year period of experimentation. Not only was staff performance affected positively, it also reflected in the customer rating of the agency and the societal acceptance of the model of change propounded by the agency in revamping the public service ecosystem of the state.

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