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Can Italy follow in Estonia's footsteps and digitise all public services?

Challenges include a large, rapidly ageing population and a decentralised political system



If Estonia's experience is anything to go by, the future of public services is digital. The Baltic state's [X-Road system](#) has allowed Estonia to digitise 99% of government services, which in 2014 alone saved over [3,225 years](#) of civil servants' time. Companies in Estonia can be incorporated in [under 20 minutes](#); taxes can be [submitted in five](#).

Estonia has become the poster child for high-tech public services, but it remains to be seen whether a country with one of Europe's smallest and youngest populations can serve as a useful model for other countries.

These reforms aren't straightforward, especially in countries with large populations. Now, Italy is attempting to digitise its own services, and the public servants leading the

effort are learning firsthand that bringing government into the 21st century isn't just a case of simply flicking a switch.

For Italy, progress towards implementation has been more halting than it ever was in Estonia. However, because of this, it may prove to be a more useful example for other governments looking to reform public services.

Electronic ID

Estonia's reforms have been built on the back of an [electronic identification \(E-ID\)](#) system that has been adopted by citizens across the country. E-ID systems allow citizens to prove who they are without having to supply conventional documentation or physically go to government agencies. There are various different technologies which allow this, accessible through cards, key codes, or even fingerprints. All have the same result: individuals can quickly and easily verify who they are, granting them access to both public and private services.

“Digital public services are a fundamental key to ease the life of citizens”

Estonia's E-ID system is built using a form of the same [blockchain technology](#) that underpins cryptocurrencies like bitcoin: with it, citizens are able to control precisely which data they share with government, and which parts of government are allowed to access it.

In recent years, ever more governments have created their own systems. In 2009, India established the [biometric Aadhar system](#), which has given a digital ID to 1.13 billion citizens. Italy launched its version in 2016, and, for the past two years, has been trying to get its citizens and public servants on board.

Why digital?

For the Italian public servants in charge of digital transformation, its benefits are simple. “Digital public services are a fundamental key to making the lives of citizens easier and creating the infrastructure for companies to profit,” said Antonio Samaritani, Director General at the [Agency for Digital Italy \(AgID\)](#), the public body tasked with implementing Italy's electronic ID and public service reform.

AgID launched [SPID](#), Italy's digital identity system, to serve as the backbone of government digitisation. Once citizens sign up, they can use a single ID to access online public services, from health records to school payments.

Reform is mandatory: over the coming years (the exact date has not yet been announced), government agencies must find a way to make their services compatible with it.

“The majority of people working in public administrations are an average age of 50 years old and haven't been trained to use more innovative tools”

In just over a year since launching SPID, AgID has successfully activated [over two million digital identities](#) for its citizens, giving them access to 4,000 online services. Individuals use the system to verify their identities, which grants them access to their online records.

The demographic challenge

“The majority of people working in public administrations are an average age of 50 years old,” said [Gianluca Sgueo](#), a Global Media Seminar Professor at New York University in Florence, and a former Italian public servant. “You have parts of the administration that are doing very well, but if you look at the full picture, the fact is many of the civil servants haven't been trained to use more innovative tools. Long story short, it's another obstacle to a culture of innovation.”

Estonia's population is [1.3 million people](#). Comparatively, Italy has a population of [60.6 million](#), meaning that the two million people currently signed up to the digital ID system remain just a small proportion of the total population. Italy has the highest proportion of people over 65 in Europe at [22% of its total population](#), while Estonia's is below the continent-wide average at [19%](#).

The political challenge

AgID is a technical administration as opposed to a conventional office of the state. It doesn't have a minister and Antonio Samaritani serves as its executive officer. It holds its powers by decree, theoretically rendering it and its work resistant to changes in the political administration.

In a country which has had [66 different governments](#) since WWII (the UK, in comparison, has had 26), and where maintaining reforms across different administrations is difficult, such a status is useful.

“I can list a lot of very nice initiatives that spread innovation, but the issue is that because we have a very tough system, as soon as the new politicians are in charge they cancel what has been done before,” said Sgueo. “It’s almost impossible to tell you that there’s been a strategy over the years. There are many nice examples, but not really a strategy that could be used as an example to reform the public administration.”

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Estonia’s political system is centralised and homogeneous – it managed to make its electronic ID system mandatory across all government departments in just a year. In comparison, Italy has over 8,000 separate municipalities, many of them rural, and many with fewer than 5,000 residents. The country has a history of decentralisation and political eclecticism, as its most recent election results have only confirmed.

Bringing in the private sector

The electronic IDs are built by private providers, which need to comply with conditions set by AgID. IDs must work across all platforms, be it smartphone, tablet or computer, and should be built so that the provider can’t know who is accessing which services. The benefit of this system is its cost-effectiveness: private companies build the infrastructure for the electronic IDs at no cost to the state. Their incentive comes from the fact that, in time, citizens will be able to use the IDs to access private services, for which they can be charged.

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In theory, citizens will eventually be able to access any services through the SPID, but this requires that they are first made available online. To date, the coverage of online services in Italy is mixed: Rome is leading the way, with 60 services from school registration to taxes transferred to SPID-accessible online platforms. Several national services such as the state's pension system are online, but other municipalities, such as Genoa and Palermo, have only recently made some of their services accessible to SPID.

Meeting the challenge

Italy's ageing population is a double-edged sword: it both prevents citizens from switching from physical to digital IDs and makes it difficult to get public servants to change their working habits.

Both require a level of digital literacy which it is difficult to find amongst older generations. As a result, pushing through large-scale reforms is a painstaking process, with few opportunities to cut corners.

To counteract this, AgID is using incentives and a dedicated communications strategy to sign people up. Funding schemes such as the teachers' charter, a personal bonus for the professional development of teachers, is only accessible with SPID. In March 2017, AgID announced "SPID week", and launched an awareness campaign to boost sign-ups.

While implementation of the SPID is mandatory, this will be carried out individually by each administration. AgID provides guidance and also a distinct design for each of the new websites, in order to give a consistent user experience. Explaining the approach, Samaritini said: "The agency has the unique opportunity to develop at central level the technical requirements that public administrations bodies need to respect vis-a-vis the digitisation of public services."

The same circumstances that make public sector reform in Italy difficult also show why it has such great potential to make positive change. An electronic ID system, and the digital public services it will enable, could establish closer links between central and local government, cut costs and save time spent by public servants on administrative matters. Ultimately, it should improve the public's access to the services they need.

The initial take-up of the SPID has happened relatively quickly: there are now nearly double the number of people with a digital ID than in Estonia. Despite this, it is unclear

whether this has transformed the way government and citizens interact.

“What you can already see with the main administrations – the cities like Rome or the national administrations like the government – is that it has been implemented. There are new services everyday,” said Sgueo. “But as soon as you move to a lower level, that is, in my opinion, the main obstacle.”

“According to some friends who work in this field, it’s the real beginning,” said Sgueo. “If you want to know my opinion, it’s on the way to infiltrating the public system, but at this very moment I wouldn’t say that it has changed the quality of the Italian public administration, or that it’s going to change it very soon.” The next few years will show whether Italy can meet the challenge.

(Picture credit: Flickr/MarcoVerch)

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