

## Building & sustaining a digital government research center

### A director's perspective

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# Building and Sustaining a Digital Government Research Center: A Director's Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This panel provides participants a chance to interact with five digital government research center directors about their experiences in building sustainable digital government research centers. Panelists, selected to provide regional representation, will discuss their experiences and share lessons learned. Topics to be covered building a research agenda, building mutually beneficial partnerships, fund raising, finding and developing talent and engaging with university, funding, and other institutional partners. Following the formal remarks participants will be invited to raise additional topics of interest for discussion with the Directors on the panel.

## CCS CONCEPTS

[Social and professional topics](#) → [Professional Topics](#) → [Management of computing and information systems](#)  
[Social and professional topics](#) → [Professional Topics](#)  
→ [Computing and business](#) → [Socio-technical systems](#)  
[Social and professional topics](#) → [Professional Topics](#) → [Computing profession](#) → [Funding](#)

## KEYWORDS

Digital government, research directors, building and sustaining a research program, diverse partnerships, e-government, funding, research program.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Five members of the digital government society will share their insights as directors of digital government research centers. The goal of the panel is to give participants a chance to hear from and interact with the directors, ideally helping participants who might be considering the question: should I create a digital government research center? Following a series of planning meetings, the panelists selected a set of critical issues and challenges that each, in their role as a center director, must address on a regular basis. Each panelist will speak to one of these topics and then engage in an open discussion with participants on the five selected topics, among others.

## 2 SELECTED ISSUES FACING DIGITAL GOVERNMENT RESEARCH DIRECTORS

Each panelist will focus their introductory remarks on a selected topic before opening the floor to discussion on a range of topics related to building and sustaining digital government research center.

### 2.1 Building a Fundable Research Agenda

Designing a fundable research agenda for a research center is challenging. The success of such an agenda relies both on the ability of the director to ensure that the agenda is identifiable and easily communicated to center staff, potential partners, future employees, the home institution and most importantly to funders. It must be coherent and relevant. Due to the applied nature of

most digital government research centers, such research agendas must also be agile in a way that allows the center to both remain connected to its core identity and competencies, while also being responsive to evolving interests and challenges.

To ensure funding is consistently secured, digital government research centers must be able to develop competitive proposals. Developing competitive proposals requires the ability to design studies and strategic consulting projects that are relevant to the questions and interests of funders; whether it be a national science agency or a small local government. Such proposals must link in some way to the mission of the center and to the core competencies of center staff and partners; they must be doable and allow for the generation of valuable and relevant results of interest to both academics and practitioners.

Ensuring a sustainable research agenda requires a center director to continuously provide evidence of value to funders and to continuously engage in business development activities. A research center director must be an entrepreneur, always looking for new opportunity that provides exciting new work to engage both junior and senior staff, sustainable funding, but also that allows for a clear line of sight between the focus of the center and the purpose of the research.

## 2.2 Talent Development

One of the biggest challenges facing digital government research centers is finding qualified personnel to staff projects. A human resource (HR) strategy to attract and retain talented people is key to success of any such center. New staff must have theoretical knowledge and research skills, but also understand practice, and be able to conduct research and educate. People with this range of skills are hard to find. Often new staff can be found in their own educational (master) programme, as they prepare for this kind of positions. Recruitment must focus worldwide if centers are to find the best.

Apart from providing training and coaching, creating an environment focused on learning and growing is essential. A primary responsibility for a director is to develop the capabilities of staff, nurture their careers, and manage the performance of individuals and teams. This means center directors must allocate some of their time to help in developing staff by giving hints and tips, feedback on papers, proposals and reports writing, helping with improving their presentations and so on. Such staff development activity includes helping with the development of clear and focused research activities that fit within the Center's overall strategy and vision. Creating and continuously communicating shared values is critical to success. Staff must be clear on what is expected and what is important and the director must adhere to these value and behaviors as well. A key component of staff development is exposing junior staff to senior researchers in the field. Visits to conferences and other institutes will help them to initiate collaborations.

The acquiring of personal grants for researchers also needs to be encouraged. This enables to independent growth and focus. If this is to occur, directors must devote personal time to this agenda and provide hands-on coaching and training so that new learning can occur. Each new member of a research center has a unique background and experiences to nurture and leverage.

## 2.3 Forming and Managing Partnerships

A center cannot achieve all its goals and complete all its tasks relying on its own resources only. Outside partners are very helpful when internal resources and capabilities are not sufficient. Therefore, forming and managing multiple diverse partnerships is critical to the success of a center. A center director needs to look for, build up and maintain partnerships with outside stakeholders including academic institutions, government practitioner, private companies, NGOs and international partners.

Ideal partners are those who share similar goals and values, but who provide a complement to the capabilities of the center. Successful partnerships could enhance a center's efficiency and effectiveness while keeping its organization size and cost reasonable and agile. However, identifying good partners takes time and energy. Good judgment in selecting partners is critical to avoid time wasting and potential risks.

Once a partnership is in place, managing and maintaining the collaboration may take even more wisdom and patience. Consensus needs to be built when discrepancy occurs and problems need to be solved when conflicts emerge, meanwhile, the director also needs to appreciate the diversities in perspectives and specialty among various partners so as to generate and preserve sparks of partnership.

## 2.4 Quality Control and Demand

Digitization has reached the political decision maker. Consequently, the demand for applied research and scientific evaluation is getting greater. This demand can create numerous challenges and open questions for governments and public administrations. On the one hand, such demand creates great opportunities for centers to generate more insight and have more impact; on the other hand, the demand creates resource capacity issues in different stages of contracted research projects.

Another challenge is that time pressures, set by politicians, often limit the opportunity for proper and rigorous research designs. Such limits are at the root of many problems with these projects. The results of these projects may have an impact on society in the digital age, but researchers are not able to utilize insight and lessons learned in the scientific arena because of a lack of rigor in the research design.

Conducting rigorous studies is crucial for further scientific career paths especially of young researchers. A third type of challenge is proper data collection, which is almost as critical as research design. Analyzing and transforming data and insights into a scientific paper in the research era of e-government, or related disciplines requires planning resources within the research teams, which is getting more and more challenging because of current and future demand. If staff must move on to the next project in order to ensuring funding, new insights and knowledge may remain unpublished.

On the other hand, such demand offers enormous opportunities for interdisciplinary research centers, on an individual researcher level, institutional and societal level. There is no better place to work on real life problems and learn how theory and practice and the different disciplines are interrelated. Young researchers learn with high speed combining these elements and develop a holistic understanding of technology, organizations and law, which is crucial for every project in administration and politics.

Universities with interdisciplinary research centers generate public attention and create real impact in society, which always is one of their main missions, even in mode one especially in mode two and three.

## 2.5 Citizen Approach

Social development and the dramatic indicators of inequality in human development in Latin America have been on the agenda of regional organizations in Latin America for decades. Since the earlier e-government projects in the 90s the results of the IT implementations have been appropriated by those better placed to take advantage of increased service provision. Gaps have widened, not merely as a result of macro-economic turbulence and strategies adopted for fiscal stability, but also through the skewed redistribution of opportunity and access to services and resources. With the spread of technology in the region by local governments, as in Smart Cities projects, any strategy that is based on merely expanding urban services by the use of technology or providing more of the same will inevitably run the risk of reproducing existing patterns of exclusion. Moving the focus to the construction of citizenship places the change and improvement in such existing patterns at the top of the development agenda for the region. One challenge for a Research Center for Technology in Governments in Latin America is to articulate the different interests of researchers and partners involved in the projects such as service providers, public administrators, IT providers, so that they look at their innovation projects in a different way. Successful projects must generate tangible, acceptable and clear consequences for the conditions and practice of citizenship, both for those receiving and providing urban services and for the wider community within which these actions take part.

Building a fundable research agenda, forming partnerships and managing the technical staff under this approach is a challenge not completely overcome. On the other hand, the possibility of developing multidisciplinary projects under this vision can lead to more important results of the use of technology especially by subnational governments.

## 3.0 PANELISTS

The panel will welcome the following speakers:

**Marijn Janssen** Dr. Marijn Janssen is a full Professor in ICT & Governance and chair of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) section of the Technology, Policy and Management Faculty of Delft University of Technology. The ICT section contains about 40 persons from which more than the half are Ph.D. candidates. Dr. Janssen research interests are in the field of orchestration, shared services arrangements, and open and big data and infrastructures. He is Co-Editor-in-Chief of Government Information Quarterly, conference chair of IFIP EGOV series and is chairing mini-tracks at the DG.O, ICEGOV, HICCS and AMCIS conferences. He was ranked as one of the leading e-government researchers in surveys in 2009, 2014 and 2016, and has published over 380 refereed publications. More information: [www.tbm.tudelft.nl/marijn](http://www.tbm.tudelft.nl/marijn).

**Theresa A. Pardo**, Ph.D. is the director of the Center for Technology in Government at the University at Albany, SUNY and a full research professor in public administration and policy at Rockefeller College. Dr. Pardo is a co-developer of the top-ranked Government Information Strategy and Management

concentration at the University of Albany and is past president of the Digital Government Society. Dr. Pardo serves as OpenNY Adviser to New York State's Governor Andrew Cuomo and is Chair of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's National Advisory Committee. She is a member of the User Working Group of the NASA Socioeconomic Data and Applications Center (SEDAC) at Columbia University. Additionally, Dr. Pardo is a member of the Steering Committee of the National Science Foundation funded North East Big Data Hub, an International Advisor to the E-Government Committee for the China Information Association, and serves as an Expert Advisor to the Open Data 500 Project.

**Peter Parycek** is a Professor of E-Governance and Head of the Department for E-Governance and Administration at the Danube University Krems. As a lawyer and graduate of the Master's program Telematics, his work is at the intersection of legal policy, social and technological developments. His research and project priorities include eGovernance, eDemocracy and eGovernment. He is the founder of the conference series CeDEM (International Conference for eDemocracy and Open Government) held in Austria and Asia, and also responsible for the open access journal JeDEM (eJournal of eDemocracy and Open Government).

**Maria Alexandra Cunha** holds a degree in Administration (1987) and Informatica (1982) from the Federal University of Paraná, a Master's degree in Business Administration from Fundação Getulio Vargas - SP (1994) and a PhD in Business Administration from the University of São Paulo (2000). She was coordinator of the ADI division of the National Association of Postgraduate and Research in Administration - ANPAD for 4 years. She is a professor at the School of Business Administration of São Paulo and has been a professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná for 23 years. She has experience in the area of Administration, with emphasis on Public Organizations, working mainly in the following subjects: electronic government, public computing, information society, public administration and information technology management. She was a Productivity Scholar at the Araucária Foundation, 2013-2014.

**Lei Zheng, Ph.D.** is the director of the Lab for Digital and Mobile Governance at Fudan University and an associate professor at the School of International Relations and Public Affairs. His research interests include open government data, cross-boundary information sharing, government use of social media and mobile public services. Dr. Zheng serves as a member of the Editorial Board of Government Information Quarterly and China E-Government Journal, and he is also a member of the E-government Advisory board of China Information Association. He is the conference co-chair of dg.o 2017 held in Fudan University, Shanghai, and co-chaired tracks and minitracks at the dg.o, HICCS and ICEGOV conferences. He holds a PhD in Public Administration and Policy from the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, University at Albany, SUNY.