

Best practices in digitalizing university administration

Digital Guides

Digital Guides are people in specialist departments (e.g. HR, finance, or a certain faculty or institute; not in the IT Center) with an affinity for digitalization who are well versed in both the processes and the application of the systems used by the specialized departments. As Digital Guides, these people should act as a link between the specialized departments and the IT Center. This has three aims:

1. Digital guides function as multipliers of information and knowledge. They receive brief training for the task and are expected to pass on their knowledge to the employees in the specialist department and to support and help with application problems when using digital tools. It is not about solving technical problems (the IT Center is responsible for this), but about providing assistance in using the systems.
2. As subject matter experts (e.g., with regard to administrative processes, needs of users of the digital tools), the Digital Guides can also provide assistance in the further development of the systems by providing feedback to the IT Center.
3. Through more direct and low-threshold communication, Digital Guides can help to achieve greater acceptance of the digital tools among employees.

Competence profile

Digital Guides should either have or learn a range of skills. These include:

- knowledge of the processes in their own area,
- basic knowledge of digitalization or an affinity for digital tools or applications,
- being able to listen to others, respectful communication,
- knowledge of challenges in digitalization processes,
- the basics of change management.

These skills can be learned or refreshed in various training courses. It is important that the Digital Guides are trained in using the digital tools or systems that are to be implemented.

Implementation in the DigiUGov project

We conducted a survey on the status quo of implementing Digital Guides in the participating institutions in the project. This revealed that the role of Digital Guides had already been established in various forms at almost all universities. As the Digital Guides already had the basic skills necessary, we organized a workshop in which Digital Guides gained knowledge on process modelling and had the opportunity to exchange experiences. Both best practices and common challenges were identified.

Best practices and challenges of digital guides

The use of knowledge management platforms (e.g. wiki systems) has proven to be very positive. However, regular maintenance of the content is necessary here, for which time must be available. It is conceivable, for example, to regularly invest a few hours a week for this task.

Another key topic of discussion was change management. Target group-specific and detailed, explanatory communication in projects using a variety of methods (videos, brochures, etc.) was positively emphasized. It is important to address different groups in different ways and to allow sufficient time for learning. Regular exchange of experiences and short information formats are also valuable. Train-the-trainer concepts have worked well, as different approaches by individual trainers can appeal to a broader range of people. The quality of communication and change management can be assessed using surveys, for example.

The integration of different technical systems is also a major issue at most universities. The large number of different technical systems makes it increasingly difficult to establish standardized data management and working methods. The dismantling of interfaces conflicts with the growing demands on systems.

Digitalization strategy & e-billing

In May 2019, the University of Potsdam adopted a digitalization strategy for the Central University Administration in order to advance the further digitalization of administration processes in a structured manner. The aim of the University of Potsdam is to digitalize as many administrative processes as possible, taking into account the general conditions such as legal obligations, existing structures, etc.

Content of the strategy

A central component of the digitalization strategy are four goals that are to be implemented as part of the digitalization of the administration. These goals are

- to offer essential services in a user-friendly, service-oriented, digital and centralized manner, all in one place,
- to continuously review and improve processes, make them transparent and use digital systems to inform all parties involved in the process,
- to strengthen the digital skills of the employees in the central university administration, and
- to create infrastructural and organizational prerequisites for digital requirements.

Approach

Many of the prerequisites for successful administrative digitalization had not yet been met at the time the strategy was adopted. As a first step, the necessary prerequisites were therefore translated into measures to be taken. These measures were put into an action plan, including descriptions of the measures, responsibilities for implementation, and timing. In the organizational area, this included the establishment of a governance for the management of administrative IT, the development of process management, the review of internal regulations to identify potential obstacles to digitalization and the development of a strategy for handling data. A number of technical measures were also identified. For example, the University of Potsdam had a number of specialist systems, but other basic systems for document, workflow and form management were not in place. In addition, the university's existing organizational structure had to be technically mapped for use in workflows, a scanning center had to be set up, long-term storage had to be implemented, and the handling of digital signatures had to be clarified. Once the action plan had been drawn up, the measures were and are gradually being implemented.

A support structure has been established to implement the measures and specific digitalization projects. Decisions are made by a steering group, which includes representatives from the administration as well as the faculties, the staff council, and the IT center. Administrative digitalization is coordinated by a coordination office within the administration, which prepares the meetings of the steering group and maintains an overview of all ongoing activities. In addition, a whole range of other stakeholders need to be involved, who continuously support the digitalization of the administration. The involvement of stakeholders in the fields of change and participation management, IT security, data protection, and accessibility is of central importance; thus, these topics were considered and addressed from the very beginning. Observing external obligations, especially legal obligations, is also an important part of the overall planning and prioritization of projects.

Despite all the necessary preparatory work, the most important part of administrative digitalization is the implementation of specific digitalization projects. In order to develop a clear roadmap, project proposals were collected by the individual administrative departments and then prioritized based on defined criteria, such as degree of standardization, optimization potential, costs, and number of processes involved. Legal requirements also played a role here, so that, for example, electronic invoice processing was selected as one of the first projects to be implemented.

Challenges

A number of challenges quickly arose on the way to achieving the aforementioned goals. We are continuously working on finding solutions to these challenges. This includes the effective use of existing and often scarce financial and human resources. Another challenge is integrating the broadly diversified existing system landscape into new digitalization projects, as interfaces are often necessary. Furthermore, all stakeholders have their own different requirements and interests that need to be taken into account. It is not only the interests of the University of Potsdam that need to be taken into account, but also external requirements, which often necessitate a change in prioritization. The correct implementation of existing data protection or accessibility laws and regulations is also time-consuming and requires a lot of

documentation, which is hardly noticed by outsiders, but which keeps implementation projects busy for a long time.

Example of e-invoicing

Based on the legal requirement to receive and process invoices electronically in the future, a project was launched at the University of Potsdam to implement an electronic invoice workflow.

The project was divided into three phases:

- Specification phase
- Implementation phase
- Deployment phase

In the specification phase, the greatest challenge was to design a central workflow that would apply uniformly throughout the university. Several workshops were held to define the target process, involving various university departments.

In addition, the data and interfaces to be collected were defined.

In the second phase, a development environment was set up in which the technical and functional realization of the defined workflow was implemented, a group of test users was trained, and a long test phase was carried out.

The final phase involved setting up the productive system, setting up the user administration, and the system and acceptance test. Following this, training courses were held for all employees at the University of Potsdam, user documentation was created in the wiki and a support structure was set up.

Experience from the project has shown that the early involvement of different interest groups, broad-based communication, and constant information to all employees are essential for the successful implementation of a digitalization project.

Further planning

The first evaluation and revision of the digitalization strategy will take place in the near future. The objectives will be adapted with the help of the knowledge gained over the past five years and in some cases expanded to include further aspects, such as equal opportunities. Now that the development of the basic principles is almost complete, the focus in future will be much more on implementing further projects with added value for the employees of the University of Potsdam. Preparations for this are currently underway.

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