[**Decoding Digitisation**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1628925/decoding-digitisation)

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WE have all been waiting for the story of information technology in Pakistan to unfold and show its true potential but short-lived plans and senseless bans seem to hold it back.

Log on to Twitter and you’ll find the youth helplessly pulling their hair out at yet another policy intervention (or lack thereof) that’s completely divorced from the realities of the evolving global digital landscape, and blaming ‘boomers’ for being in charge. Equally frustrated journalists would club those failures with the broader bureaucratic inefficiencies and inertia of the government towards reform and meaningful change in most sectors. While this criticism does have value in keeping the decision-makers on their toes, pushing them to act and holding them accountable, it does not offer a meaningful insight into the crux of the problem. It’s akin to slapping your old, withering computer randomly out of frustration enough times and the computer jerking into action; sure, it’ll work for a bit but only to break down yet again. Eventually, you’ll have to take a deep breath, pull the computer apart and really troubleshoot to see what’s going on in order to fix it for real.

While there is a lot of conversation about what is not working, there is much less about the way forward. As someone who tried to make a dent for this sector in the government — albeit not very successfully — I got a long, hard look at the internal machinery that is meant to be enabling a forward-looking digital ecosystem in Pakistan. Today, I wanted to share why I think things are in a gridlock and which wires need to be untangled for the system to start working — for good.

What Pakistan must do to accelerate its tech transformation

**Precise targets and long-term vision**

The scope of information technology or digitisation continues to be discussed in a rather limited manner in mainstream discourse. Reducing it to apps, online portals, start-ups or software houses is a costly injustice. The absence of a broad, comprehensive definition has prevented the development of an overarching, long-term vision for sustainable change. The parochial view has instead allowed policymakers to pat themselves on the back for small, isolated projects and give an illusive impression of real progress. For example, in the past several years, flashy [schemes involving distribution of laptops](https://www.dawn.com/news/1114190/pm-launches-laptop-%09scheme) in colleges or grants to start-ups have popped up in various parts of the country. In the moment, they are deemed praiseworthy; it’s understandable why that’s the case though — given the sheer dearth of resources, any small initiative that solves a problem temporarily for a few people is a welcome ‘change’.

However, we now have evidence that such disparate schemes do not contribute to any meaningful, sustainable change. Distribution of grants and creation of fancy incubation spaces (by a debt-ridden government) for entrepreneurs won’t help grow the start-up ecosystem unless it is accompanied by bold reforms by the State Bank, the Securities & Exchange Commission of Pakistan and the Federal Board of Revenue. Investors must be able to repatriate their funds. Entrepreneurs should neither have to spend three months setting up a company and getting it registered, nor an additional few months trying to open a corporate bank account and setting up payroll. The distribution of laptops and internet dongles to students, while noble, does not solve the core problem around access. Making access to the internet (both devices and data) more affordable can have a multiplier effect on connectivity, which has been globally proven to be the single biggest democratising force.

**Read:** [*How to make Digital Pakistan work*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1574748)

Therefore, instead of implementing short-lived plans that momentarily check off buzzwords associated with information technology and make for splashy headlines, we need to decide where we want to see ourselves a decade down the line and then define precise targets that will help us reach that dream in stages. The process begins with expanding the scope of IT and this is an exercise we conducted in the early stages of the Digital Pakistan initiative. Broadly speaking, five streams need to be running in parallel and complementing each other: 1) access and connectivity, 2) digital infrastructure (which is the most underrated), 3) e-governance, 4) digital skills and literacy, and 5) innovation and entrepreneurship. We need crystal-clear short-, medium- and long-term key performance indicators for each stream and, most importantly, we need to ensure that the relevant stakeholders take ownership so that they can be held accountable against those goals.

**Clear ownership and accountability**

Both intuitively and officially on paper, it is very clear who has the capacity for and the responsibility to lead the charge of delivering a healthy digital ecosystem: the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunications (MoITT). Currently, however, this easily discernible ownership has become needlessly murky in two aspects.

The first aspect is that there are parallel structures in the form of divisions or advisers that sit outside of the MoITT. The government can bring in the most competent advisers and task forces in the world but they simply won’t be able to deliver if their vision is not backed by the relevant bureaucratic machinery and meaningful legal authority. Any new policy or reform is implemented by the government through its Rules of Business. The entity that has the ability to leverage these rules is the relevant ministry and there are no two ways about it.

The second aspect is that there are a variety of sub-bodies under the MoITT or provincial governments that are working in silos.

● There are bodies like the National Information Technology Board, Ignite and Universal Service Fund but between severe resource constraints, delayed decision-making and, in some cases, lack of leadership, they continue to be hamstrung.

● The existence of the KP Information Technology Board and Punjab Information Technology Board (and the lack of equivalent bodies in other federating units) is confusing because they seem to be duplicating some of the work that also seems to be happening at the federal level.

● The role of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority as a regulator is crucial but it needs to have the ability to operate independently with a clear vision on how to reform the sector.

**Strong digital Identity and Infrastructure**

A critical piece of any type of digital transformation is digital identity, which is why it’s unsettling that our mainstream discourse and understanding of the subject hardly ever brings up Nadra.

Success in bringing about reform in any sector depends a lot on your ability to leverage digital identity. This is true for land, education, health, tax — you name it. Are you giving out benefits to the right people? Are you vaccinating the right people? Are you collecting tax from the right people? The list goes on and on.

While it appears simple to talk about leveraging Nadra, it’s important to understand exactly what digital infrastructure is. After evaluating case studies from around the world, we believed that in Pakistan we needed to invest in five interconnected areas that can drive true digital transformation:

**● Digital identity:** A universal biometric digital identity, in line with inter-governmental standards.

**● Digital data:** A digital repository of personal data and records for every citizen and business, including domicile, property, employment, education, health, taxes, etc.

**● Digital signatures:** Digital signatures, like wet signatures, that allow digital signoff on documents. The citizen or business is in control of who can access their personal data.

**● Digital payments:** A real time, low-cost digital payments system that facilitates faster, cheaper and easier commerce between citizens, businesses, and the government.

**● Digital services:** Infrastructure that allows each citizen and business to approve sharing their data with government and private-sector systems, to receive a variety of personalised, seamless services (eg grants, loans, insurance, taxes, voting etc.)

In particular, the digital services sector offers unique and untapped potential that can help Pakistan accelerate and leapfrog past other countries to become a global leader in digital government and digital citizenship. With this digital infrastructure in place, developers, start-ups, businesses and government departments can innovate on unique use cases to make citizens’ lives easier. So the bottom line is that unless we have an independent Nadra with a visionary leader who understands exactly how important digital identity is for unlocking nationwide cross-sector reform, we will continue being incremental in our approach.

**Right people for the right role**

We need the right people for the right job not just at Nadra but any institution that’s meant to play a crucial role in our digital journey. We need people who are doers and want to get stuff done — people who don’t bring politics into delivery and don’t chase clout.

It’s unfair and unrealistic to expect any government body, new or old, to deliver without the right resources. We have seen time and again across various sectors of government that it’s next to impossible to bring on board or, at least sustain, the right people: the long-winded and archaic processes and absurd caps on compensation ensure that those relationships never work out.

It is critical to understand that the wrong person leading an organisation with money at their disposal is more dangerous than not having a leader. We need to champion both meritocracy and open-mindedness in our approach to human resourcing to make a real dent in any sector. Information technology is no exception. In fact, considering that it’s a particularly specialised field with constant innovation across the globe, excellent human resource is perhaps all the more important in this industry.

**Conclusion**

Set a clear vision, break it down into bite-sized goals, assign clear owners to those goals, give them the authority and space to execute those goals (without jumping to premature action based on unverified feedback) and then performance-manage them based on outcomes. It’s not rocket science but it’s critical to get in place if we want to see sustained performance and results.

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